

THE YOGA OF Tibetan Breath

Breathing Practices for Healing
the Body and Cultivating Wisdom

ANYEN RINPOCHE &
ALLISON CHOYING ZANGMO

“Meticulously guides readers on how to awaken and perfect the power of innate energy to heal and enlighten.”

—Tulku Thondup, author of *Boundless Healing*

“These clear and practice-based teachings on purifying the wind energies are much-needed medicine for our times. Rooted in the ancient wisdom of dharma and an understanding of modern science, the yogas of the body, wind energy, and mind are presented in a fresh, lively prose that is a delight to read.”

—Tsoknyi Rinpoche

ABOUT THE BOOK

Modern science and classic spiritual traditions agree: regulating the breath leads to radiance and wellness of body, mind, and spirit. With the simple teachings and cutting-edge research offered in *The Tibetan Yoga of Breath*, you can start thriving just by integrating breathwork into your daily practice.

Basic Yantra Yoga techniques—also called wind energy training—are the key to achieving this kind of vitality, down to the cellular level. Anyen Rinpoche and Allison Choying Zangmo skillfully examine the teachings of Yantra Yoga and Buddhism through the lens of Western medical science. Their wise and accessible instruction reveals practices that are nourishing and transformative, delivering dramatic results—no experience with yoga or Buddhist meditation necessary.

ANYEN RINPOCHE is a tulku from Tibet of the Nyingma (Longchen Nyingthig) Tradition. He primarily lives in Denver, Colorado, where he founded Orgyen Khamdroling Dharma Center with a shedra (college) for Westerners. He is the author of *The Union of Dzogchen and Bodhichitta*, *Dying with Confidence*, *Journey to Certainty*, and *Momentary Buddhahood*.

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The Tibetan Yoga of Breath

Breathing Exercises for Healing the Body and Cultivating Wisdom

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We offer this book and all of our effort toward its creation to the supreme Yantra Yoga masters Khenchen Tsara Dharmakirti Rinpoche and Nyakrung Tsunpo Dorlo Rinpoche.

*In all my future lifetimes,
May I never be separate from the perfectly pure Lama.
Having received the jewel of the glorious Dharma,
May I perfect the good qualities of the stages and paths
And swiftly attain the state of the Glorious Lama.*

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Introduction

Since meeting Anyen Rinpoche more than thirteen years ago, I have heard many tales of the great masters of Tibet. Some of the most incredible and wondrous stories are those of one of his root masters, Tsunpo Dorlo Rinpoche, a great master of Yantra Yoga and the profound meditation tradition of Dzogpachenpo: the Great Perfection. The Great Perfection is the most profound style of meditation in the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism presented in this book, that of the Nyingmapa Secret Mantrayana. The Great Perfection is complemented by the breathing and asana poses that make up an ancient style of Tantric Yoga, called *Yantra Yoga*. Yantra Yoga is the formal name of a contemplative tradition of working with the body's energetic channels, "wind energies" (which includes the breath), and vital essences.

Not everyone's body is suited to practice the strenuous asana poses presented in the tradition of Yantra Yoga. It is light-years away from the relatively gentle style of yoga many of us practice in modern America. However, Anyen Rinpoche often told me that the root of Yantra Yoga is working with the breath, and that all great yogis learn the basic breathing techniques of Yantra Yoga as part of their spiritual mastery.

Practicing Yantra Yoga has enabled the great yogis of India and Tibet to achieve miraculous feats, such as personal healing even from incurable illnesses, the ability to withstand physical hardships such as a lack of food or warmth even for long periods of time, and, of course, the complete realization of wisdom, where one is liberated from all concepts of the ego and of dualistic perception. Dorlo Rinpoche was an unusual kind of Yantra Yoga master for the modern age. He exhibited behavior that reaches the level of a fairy tale, such as having such pure and controlled use of the breath that he only needed to breathe a few times an hour. Anyen Rinpoche's and my own root teacher, Tsara Dharmakirti Rinpoche, also relied upon the teachings on Yantra Yoga and the Great Perfection to completely heal himself from cancer in his younger years.

Anyen Rinpoche studied Yantra Yoga with Dorlo Rinpoche in a traditional retreat setting, during the coldest time of year in an earthen dwelling high in Kham, Tibet. The practitioners of that retreat studied *tummo*, the generation of inner heat, among other practices. Practicing in a harsh, frigid environment is essential to the practice, as it motivates the retreatants to practice extremely diligently until the body naturally generates heat despite the cold environment. At the culmination of the retreat, Anyen Rinpoche was tested in the traditional manner by allowing the shoulders of his unclothed body to be draped with a damp towel, which then had to be dried by the body's own inner heat.

The teachings on Yantra Yoga explain in detail the manner in which the purification of the breath acts as the cause for healing body and mind and, ultimately, for spiritual realization. The breathing practices of the Yantra Yoga tradition are referred to as “wind energy training” throughout this book. The basis for these practices is introduced in part 1, and the practice of wind energy training is introduced in greater detail in part 2.

I grew up in the suburbs of Denver, Colorado, as an ordinary, middle-class girl. Most of my childhood was spent feeling caught between two worlds. My yearning for a contemplative lifestyle existed in contrast to a society that believes in material wealth, status, and power as the ultimate measure of success. As a result, I experienced isolation, anxiety, and sleeplessness. My traditional American childhood gave me few tools to help me deal with these feelings. I was introduced to meditation and contemplative practice at the age of sixteen, after which I began practicing meditation seriously. I finally felt I had connected with the thing that was missing in my life. In my early twenties, I traveled to Tibet and then Nepal, where I met Anyen Rinpoche and became deeply involved in the contemplative and devotional practices of Tibetan Buddhism.

Although I am a committed practitioner of the Secret Mantrayana tradition, I do not take lightly the discipline and diligence required to engage in many of its practices. Because of its strenuous asana poses, I have never thought of Yantra Yoga as a tradition I was capable of practicing. And tales of Anyen Rinpoche’s own story of training in the middle of winter seemed magical and otherworldly to me, and completely out of my reach. However, as my understanding of Vajrayana practice has grown over the years, I began to learn some of the breath practices from the Yantra Yoga tradition that immensely improved my mental and emotional stability, as well as augmented my physical health. These were aspects that even I, an ordinary practitioner, could learn, use, and benefit from. I noticed a change in my ability to balance my body and mind in daily life situations, and I began to feel more comfortable with my ability to adapt to all kinds of environments and to work more compassionately with others.

As I prepared to write this book with Anyen Rinpoche, I delved into the medical research that has been done on the subject of the breath and on the health benefits of bringing the proper amount of oxygen into the blood, with the assistance of my Vajra Sister Sarah Teague Johnson. I was amazed by how the yogis of India and Tibet, prior to the invention of modern technology or research instruments, gained a thorough knowledge of the effect of the breath, proper and improper, on our physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Not only did these classic masters understand the

problems caused by improper breathing in a way that perfectly corresponds to modern medical science, but they also knew how to remedy these problems with very simple techniques. These breathing “treatments” and “cures” are as easy as working with posture, nasal breathing, and the elongation of the inhalation and exhalation. The benefits of these contemplative techniques can also be explained with a detailed understanding of medical science. How remarkable that the masters of old could have knowledge that is so true, so exact, and so pertinent to our health in the modern world.

In this book, we have attempted to offer the most useful information for those interested in starting to practice wind energy training, using medical science as a starting point. Yantra Yoga, with its rich oral and textual tradition, has its own parallel way of describing the negative effects of oxygen and carbon dioxide deprivation on the body, mind, and emotions. By weaving together the knowledge of these two sources, the modern and the mystical, we hope many readers of this book will be inspired to start working with the tradition of wind energy training.

Of course, this book offers only the most basic of teachings on wind energy training, those that are appropriate for any individual to start applying. For anyone who wishes to delve into deeper training and more detailed instructions than a book can provide, the importance of seeking out an authentic spiritual master cannot be overstated. An authentic teacher who has had a lifetime of training in Yantra Yoga and has become the close student of a master of this tradition will be able to give proper and complete instructions on this practice, and point out mistakes and pitfalls. In the West, we are used to thinking that a teaching-certification program is enough to make us a master at something, since it confers a license to teach others. While this may be true of some subjects, wind energy training is definitely not one of them. True proficiency and skill is not gained in a few weeks or a few months. A few classes or retreats do not make a master!

While I do not claim to be a great practitioner of meditation, I have found that many of the physical and emotional conditions that I suffered from earlier in life, such as anxiety, migraine headaches, and chronic lung conditions, have disappeared since I began working with meditation, mindfulness, and the breath. I am not surprised to find that all of these conditions are associated with improper breathing and a lack of balance between the oxygen and carbon dioxide in the blood. Meditation has not only helped to quiet my mind, it has also naturally brought greater balance to my wind energy, which has helped to heal many of the imbalances in my physical and mental health.

I would like to be clear that we, the authors of this book, are not doctors. We believe in taking a holistic approach to the treatment of any physical, mental, or

emotional imbalance. We believe that a combination of factors—working with wind energy training, practicing meditation, exercising, paying attention to diet and nutrition, following the advice of health care practitioners, and using Western and natural medications when necessary—is the most effective way to treat any imbalance. We urge you not to stop any treatment plan that you are currently following, but instead to add wind energy training to your current treatment plan. As you find greater balance in body and mind, you will be in a better position to evaluate or make changes to your overall wellness program.

In this modern world, so afflicted by famine, war, weaponry, genocide, and the swift and unknown effects of technology, how lucky we are that we have available the guidance of many rich spiritual traditions! May the teachings in this book alleviate the suffering of beings everywhere.

ALLISON CHOYING ZANGMO

PART ONE

Why We Practice Breath Yoga

Breath Is Life

The Physical and Elemental Workings of Breath

AFTER THE CONSCIOUSNESS enters the mother's womb, the greatest support and condition for life is the breath. In this case, when we speak of the breath, we are not only speaking of the ordinary inhalation and exhalation of oxygen and carbon dioxide but we are also talking about the air element—one of the fundamental elements of life. Great classical philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle described the phenomenal world using the framework of the four elements: air, fire, water, and earth, and their harmony or discord. Like Western philosophy, the ancient traditions of Eastern philosophy, medicine, and meditation all place importance on the qualities and harmony of the four elements. The general Sutric tradition of Buddhism names the four elements and their properties as cohesion (water), solidity or inertia (earth), expansion or vibration (air), and heat or energy (fire). Tibetan Buddhist philosophy names five elements: air, water, earth, fire, and space. The fifth element, space, is uniquely important because it is the quintessence of all phenomena; space pervades all material phenomena, and makes it possible to recognize form. Space, conversely, is also the absence of form.

Classical Eastern and Western philosophy both tell us that the elements are the building blocks of life. But what does it mean to say “breath is life”?

Etymology and the history of language itself show us that breath has always been linked to life. In the linguistic roots of Latin and Greek, the names given to the soul or the spirit are directly connected to or synonymous with the breath. The Latin words *animus* (spirit) and *anima* (soul) are the same as the Greek *anemos*, meaning “wind.” Another Greek word for wind, *pneuma*, also means “spirit.” Our ancient ancestors often associated breath with the soul, since breath takes on a misty, ghostly shape in cold weather.¹

Historically breath is what gives us our soul or spirit, but we also know that breath quite literally sustains life. The strength and vitality of the body is maintained through the balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide at a cellular level. In fact, as we will demonstrate, Western medical research shows that our overall health is directly related to how we breathe.²

HOW WE BREATHE

Breath is physiological, psychological, a conditioned behavior, and a voluntary action; it is a dynamic, multifaceted, vital function of the body. Physiologically, breathing occurs automatically based upon the metabolic demands of the body. The word *metabolic* is used to describe a biochemical process in the body—the buildup of some substances and the breakdown of others. On a cellular level, breathing brings about the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide that has built up in the blood. For example, when we are running at full tilt or when we have a high fever, our body needs more oxygen pumped quickly throughout our body. Our heart rate and our breathing rate are linked for this reason; they both speed up and slow down at the same time—and this all occurs behind the scenes without any conscious effort on our part. We feel the effects of this without needing to understand the science or anatomy behind it, let alone have a medical degree.

Breathing is also influenced by our psychological condition: our perceptions and emotions. We each have a particular emotional temperament, which may be influenced by genetics, our family environment, and our life experiences. Because of these variables, our breathing rate, depth, and quality change in reaction to emotions: when we think about something in the past that upsets us, or anticipate something exciting in the future, or experience a challenging situation in the moment.

Breathing is also a conditioned behavior, a habitual response. Over time, repeated reactions to inner and outer conditions become ingrained tendencies, like any practice or habit. We unconsciously associate breathing patterns with stimuli, and therefore breathing patterns are reinforced and generalized. The more often certain emotions are associated with certain experiences, the more breathing will shift and settle into a pattern, which may not always be healthy. For example, you may have a coworker who is difficult to work with and says unkind things that are upsetting. After repeatedly experiencing this, you may feel anxious, your respiratory rate may increase, and you may carry extra tension in your shoulders while at work. Perhaps this coworker leaves for another job, so the direct stimuli are no longer there to agitate you. However, the body's pattern of increased breathing rate with tension in the upper back and shoulders may continue—the behavior has become automatic and generalized to being at work, rather than being around that coworker. In other words, our bodies can confuse conditioned response with natural function.

The voluntary control of breathing is an important and unique characteristic of the body. What other visceral functions are we able to directly control? None! We can learn to influence other visceral functions such as our heart rate or our blood pressure,

but we are not able to directly control them. We can hold our breath, or breathe faster, or breathe slower, at any time, by choice. Why does this control matter? It matters because breathing is the link between our inner and outer experiences—we take air from the outside world into the body with every inhalation. It is also the link between the physical and emotional reactions we have to those experiences. In other words, what is happening within our bodies and minds is channeled through our breathing. But the flip side of this statement is that the way we breathe can also change what is happening within our bodies and minds.

We can think of the control of our breathing as existing along a continuum, from being entirely controlled by the body (unconscious) to being entirely controlled by the mind (conscious). On one end is the physiological/automatic aspect of the breath, determined solely by the physiological requirements of the body. Moving along the continuum, we find the conditioned/behavioral; this is where our body confuses conditioned behavior based on emotions and perceptions with natural function. Physiological function is altered through repeated behavior and experiences of the mind. Conscious behaviors have transformed into unconscious physiological reactions. Next, we arrive at the psychological/perceptual/emotional qualities of the breath: how we breathe in response to our emotions and perceptions based on what is happening in the mind at that moment. The interaction of thoughts in the mind produces an accompanying physiological response. And on the far end of the continuum, we find the voluntary aspect of the breath, where the breath is directly controlled by our mind. This continuum shows that breathing is the dynamic link between the mind and the body. It spans our physical needs as well as our emotional reactions: it represents our whole experience in the body.

Research shows that our behavioral breathing patterns are so pervasive and habitual that even during REM sleep, when the body is resting the most deeply, voluntary breathing patterns can still control how we breathe.³ Again, our bodies confuse conditioned response with natural function. Breathing is distinct from other bodily functions because it is something we can directly control through awareness and training. Unlike our heart rate and other core mechanisms, which we can only influence indirectly, each of us has the power to change the way we breathe.

Two Types of Voluntary Breathing

Western medicine recognizes two types of breathing patterns. These two types of breathing patterns correlate with the area of the body where the breathing occurs, and are called thoracic and abdominal breathing. *Thoracic* refers to the thorax, an area of the chest encased by the ribs. *Abdominal* refers to the area below the diaphragm, or

around the navel. Learning the differences between the two types of breathing makes it easy to understand the basic philosophy and techniques presented in this book.

When we are at rest, abdominal breathing is generally considered the healthiest pattern. Abdominal breathing primarily relies upon the contraction and relaxation of the muscle beneath the lungs called the *diaphragm*. The diaphragm pulls air into the lower part of the lungs. However, when our bodies need more oxygen, such as during strenuous exercise, our body may involuntarily supplement abdominal breathing with thoracic breathing. In thoracic breathing, air is pulled into the upper part of the lungs.

As the name suggests, thoracic breathing comes from the accessory breathing muscles in the upper chest and rib cage rather than the diaphragm. Thoracic breathing is shallower and faster than abdominal breathing, and often includes active or forced exhalation. The passive relaxation of the diaphragm is accompanied by active contraction of additional muscles that forces the air out of the lungs, rather than simply allowing the diaphragm to relax, as during abdominal breathing. In other words, in thoracic breathing, we are contracting muscles to exhale, rather than just allowing a contracted muscle to relax.

Exercise 1

LEARN HOW YOU BREATHE

To experience these two styles of breathing, try this exercise: Place one hand on your belly and the other hand on your heart. Now take a deep breath. Did you feel your rib cage elevate and expand? That is thoracic breathing (exaggerated, of course, by the deep inhalation). Now take in a deep breath but concentrate on not moving your rib cage. Instead, slightly push your stomach out into your hand. Try to breathe so that the hand placed over your heart does not move. This is abdominal breathing. Repeat this a few times, exploring the subtleties of the muscle groups working, until you can feel the difference.

THE SCIENCE OF THE BREATH

When we are physically and mentally healthy, these two styles of breathing work together. When the body's metabolic demands require an immediate short-term energy boost, thoracic breathing supports this increase. Thoracic breathing is not necessarily unhealthy; it is just less efficient. When we are at rest, abdominal breathing is more efficient than thoracic breathing. It is slower, deeper, and more calming to the body and mind, which intuitively leads to the feeling that abdominal breathing must have

positive, cumulative health effects.

Just as abdominal breathing can have a long-term beneficial effect on the body, the absence of abdominal breathing may indicate an absence of health or the presence of a medical condition. Indeed, medical research shows that people who are ill take more thoracic breaths even when at rest than people who are healthy.⁴ Some medical conditions, such as heart disease, asthma, cancer, and cystic fibrosis, are associated with higher breathing rates—patients breathing in two to three times more air in a minute than healthy people.⁵ Excessive thoracic breathing is not uncommon; in fact, surveys suggest that 60 percent of ambulance runs in major US cities were to provide medical care for persons suffering from symptoms directly related to “overbreathing,”⁶ also called *hyperventilation*.

Oxygen in the blood. What are the effects of thoracic breathing when we are at rest—in other words, breathing in excess of the metabolic demands of the body? When we overuse the accessory breathing muscles—the muscles in the shoulder girdle as well as the chest wall—as we do when we engage in thoracic breathing, the upper lungs quickly fill with air. However, oxygen exchange is less efficient in the upper lungs. The lower lungs are six to seven times more efficient at exchanging oxygen for carbon dioxide, due to gravity, which pulls the blood supply into the lower lungs, giving more time for oxygen and carbon dioxide to exchange. Thus, breathing with the upper lungs provides the body with less oxygen than breathing with the lower lungs.⁷

Carbon dioxide in the blood. However, less oxygen in the blood is not the only issue; less carbon dioxide in the blood is also problematic. Carbon dioxide is necessary for oxygen to be released within the bloodstream, and it is also an important vasodilator; it opens the blood vessels so that blood can flow through. Additionally, a lack of carbon dioxide causes the smooth muscle in the digestive tract and connective tissue to contract, which restricts blood flow.⁸ When the blood vessels constrict, the blood is unable to carry the necessary amount of oxygen to the organs and brain, and the heart also has to work harder to circulate blood throughout the body. When we breathe too shallowly and too rapidly, such as when we breathe thoracically at rest, carbon dioxide is exhaled faster than it is produced, and carbon dioxide levels in the blood decrease. Even though it seems like we are getting more oxygen into our bodies when we breathe rapidly, we are not. Breathing thoracically at rest decreases carbon dioxide levels in the blood, which in turn deprives the tissues of the body, including the organs and the brain, of oxygen.⁹

pH balance in the body. And there is more scientific evidence that links the effects of breathing to our health and wellness. Too little carbon dioxide in the blood results in a higher blood pH, increasing blood pH from 7.4 to 7.5.¹⁰ This can lead to a medical condition called *respiratory alkalosis*. Respiratory alkalosis may sound like a

complicated disorder, but we can understand it by relating it to what we know about systems in balance. When a system, such as groundwater, becomes either too basic (alkaline) or too acidic such that its pH is not in equilibrium, it becomes unhealthy, and its ability to sustain life becomes compromised. The same is true of the blood. If blood pH is out of balance, in this case too alkaline, that imbalance spreads throughout the body. The blood's ability to sustain our body's overall health becomes compromised. Respiratory alkalosis is associated with many chronic health conditions, and can be an early or intermediate indicator of cardiac and pulmonary disorders, diseases that affect the heart and lungs.

Cell function. Additionally, the cells in our bodies behave differently depending on how much oxygen is available to them. Some doctors and medical researchers believe that reduced cell oxygenation is the driving force behind many chronic diseases. *Cell hypoxia* is a disorder in which cells are deprived of oxygen, and some research shows that cell hypoxia encourages the growth of cancerous tumors.¹¹ Also, when the cells in the heart-muscle tissues are deprived of oxygen, this results in heart problems and a painful heart condition called *angina agony*. Other diseases, such as diabetes,¹² cystic fibrosis,¹³ asthma,¹⁴ bronchitis,¹⁵ osteoporosis,¹⁶ and gastrointestinal disorders,¹⁷ are all associated with low amounts of oxygen in the brain or other bodily organs.

Deep abdominal breathing promotes full exchange of oxygen for carbon dioxide. An important point to be aware of is that the word *deep* refers to the depth of breath in the lungs. Research shows that this type of breathing can slow the heartbeat and lower or stabilize blood pressure.¹⁸ A lower resting heart rate and low blood pressure are general signs of good health.

THE BREATH, WIND ENERGY, AND WELL-BEING

The breath is not only a source of support for the physical body; it is also a support for mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. The mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the breath are easily understood in the context of traditional Tibetan language and philosophy, where the air element is central to all of life—including all of our physical, mental, and spiritual experiences.

In the Tibetan Buddhist teachings, the element of air and the breath are tied together through the word *lung* (Tib. *rlung*), which is embedded with several layers of meaning. *Lung* describes not only the breath, the movement of air we call wind, and the basic atmosphere around us, but it has the additional meaning of “wind energy.” From the point of view of Tibetan medicine, physiology, and the practice of meditation, the physical body is permeated by five types of wind energy, which support the body's most basic functions, such as circulation, digestion, and excretion.

Therefore, according to Tibetan medicine, the breath is part of an intricate system of wind energy that regulates and supports the body's health. For this reason, we often use the words *breath* and *wind energy* interchangeably. However, while the breath is one form of wind energy, referring to wind energy speaks to our entire bodily system, and all of its physical, mental, and emotional components. Tibetan medicine tells us that when all the wind energy is in balance, all of the body's basic systems work efficiently and we feel healthy.

Although there are some differences in the style of explanation, the results of imbalanced wind energy are very similar to the explanations given by Western medical science. From the point of view of Tibetan medicine and physiology, when wind energy becomes too excessive and builds up in the upper part of the lungs, as occurs during thoracic breathing, this can result in a condition called *nying lung* (Tib. snying rlung), literally "heart-wind." When we experience nying lung, the wind energy in the region around the heart and lungs has become too strong and too agitated.

Heart-wind has mental and emotional effects as well as physical ones. When we experience heart-wind, the region around the heart can feel agitated and fiery, especially inside the rib cage, making us feel impulsive, agitated, and short-tempered. The excessive energy of heart-wind can manifest in different ways. The agitation and volatility of heart-wind can lead to anxiety and restlessness. Or, if experienced over a long period of time, the chest and lungs can feel energetically heavy and may cause feelings of depression. The manifestation of heart-wind depends on the temperament and disposition of the person, as well as what the sensation of heart-wind feels like in the body.

Tibetan medicine sees heart-wind as the basis for all kinds of systemic imbalances. In terms of our bodily health, the medical tantras state that it is a source of pulmonary and cardiac disorders such as high blood pressure, heart disease, and heart attack.

According to our Tibetan tradition, heart-wind does not only result from habitual breathing patterns. Extreme emotional states, such as rage or despair, can produce heart-wind. These strong emotions can raise the level of wind energy in the upper part of the chest, and result in an immediate, severe physical and emotional reaction such as a heart attack or suicidal thoughts. Heart-wind is a condition that can be calmed through taking traditional Tibetan herbal medicine in conjunction with breath practices such as are taught in chapters 4 through 7 of this book, to correct the voluntary breathing pattern.

Wind Energy and the Emotions

We may think of the breath as something that is simply related to the exchange of

oxygen and carbon dioxide and that keeps us alive. However, wind energy not only supports our ordinary bodily systems but it also quite literally drives our emotions. Thus, it is more than simply the experience of inhalation and exhalation. Wind energy is also the physical rush of energy that accompanies all of our feelings and sensations. If we examine the body and mind carefully, we notice a connection between the breath and how we feel. When the breath is calm and relaxed, we notice that the body's energy is also calm, especially in the areas of the abdomen, lungs, and chest. As a result, the mind becomes clear and we feel relaxed and even-tempered. We feel that we can take things as they come and that we are capable of dealing with whatever life brings us.

On the other hand, when we are emotionally upset, we may notice that we breathe harder and faster, or that we are unable to inhale deeply and exhale fully. We notice a sense of pain, heaviness, or dullness in the abdomen and chest area, or even throughout the whole body, and that the mind is agitated by thoughts or overpowered by emotion. This overpowering energy manifests in all sorts of neurotic ways, such as depression, obsession, fear of intimacy, fear of trust, or feelings of grandiosity or inadequacy. Research has associated breathing patterns with specific emotional states—and it has also shown that we can influence our emotions by the way we breathe.¹⁹ In addition, Western medicine connects our psychological state with respiratory alkalosis. Respiratory alkalosis is associated with a lower pain threshold,²⁰ with feelings of discomfort and agitation,²¹ and with imbalances such as anxiety and fatigue—all the result of less efficient oxygen delivery to the tissues and organs, including the brain. Some research states that dysfunctional breathing is as high as 5 to 11 percent in the general population, 30 percent in asthmatics, and up to 83 percent in those who suffer from anxiety.²²

When putting things in the context of wind energy, all of these emotions are simply an expression of imbalanced wind energy. However, even though all of these states of mind are a sign of unbalanced wind energy, they feel very different. And though the experiences of neurotic mind, energy, and emotions can appear and feel very different from one to the other, in every single case the mind can be thoroughly pacified and calmed through working with the breath.

Of course, change will not happen immediately. But generally speaking, over a long period of time, working with the breath is effective at cutting through all types of neurotic tendencies, because it brings the wind energy into balance. As the wind energy is brought into balance and becomes more stable, neurotic tendencies lessen and even begin to disappear.

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, we call this style of practice *wind energy training*, or *the purification of wind energy*. We call the broad tradition of purifying

and working with the wind energy *Yantra Yoga*. Some traditions of Yantra Yoga also include complementary asanas, or physical poses and postures. While these asanas cannot be practiced by everyone, since every person has different physical capabilities, wind energy training can be practiced by anyone, at any moment, regardless of age or physical condition.

Much research has been done to show that working with the breath benefits not only our physical health but also our mental and emotional well-being. Tibetan Buddhism would also add to these the aspect of spiritual well-being. This research clearly shows that working with the breath balances the two components of the autonomic nervous system by enhancing parasympathetic nervous activity (enabling body and mind to relax) and decreasing sympathetic nervous activity (which causes the body to feel anxious or overly alert). It also improves respiratory and cardiovascular function, decreases the negative effects of stress and the production of stress hormones, and improves physical and mental health.²³

The Holistic Nature of the Elements

On a macro scale, the air element is vital to the life of all beings in the universe. On a human scale, air is also vital to the manifestation of the ordinary world around us. The atmosphere and the environment around us mirror the way that wind energy supports our own physical, emotional, and spiritual life.

Weather changes are related to the movements of warm and cold air masses called fronts. According to Western science, the tilt in the earth's axis as it orbits the sun causes different parts of the world to receive more heat, which manifests as the four seasons. The movement of warm air brings spring to the world around us, causing the environment to bloom full of color. Rain and thunderstorms, hot and cold temperatures, the falling of snow, and extreme weather such as blizzards, tornadoes, and hurricanes are all disturbances of the air element.

And just as natural disasters occur when there is strong agitation in the air, so it is in the minds of humans. This is simply the law of nature. Imbalance brings the opportunity for great destruction. Wind energy has the same relationship to our mental and emotional energy as it does to the environment and atmosphere. When the wind energy is wild, agitated, or imbalanced, it manifests as physical illness in the body or as mental suffering, neurosis, or any other extreme state in the mind.

We also know that when the air element is harmonious, calm, and in balance, we tend to feel happy. When the sun is shining, the weather is warm, and the air is calm, life feels abundant, and we feel comfortable. Harmony in the elements makes it easy to feel good.

One additional piece of information will help us understand how truly powerful wind energy training is. From the point of view of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, each of the elements itself is holistic. This means that the air element is not separate from the others; rather, it includes them. The air element contains aspects of water, earth, fire, and space, just as all of the other elements each contain an aspect of air. So when we work with any one of the five elements, we work with all of them. For example, the air element in the atmosphere has aspects of warmth or cold (fire), of moisture or dryness (water), of lightness or density (earth), and of expansiveness or contraction (space). Therefore, when there is an imbalance in the wind, all of the elements will fall out of balance. If the air element becomes dominant, then the aspects of water, earth, fire, and space will become weak or unstable. As a result, when one element is out of balance, an entire system becomes unstable, such as in the case of the atmosphere being disrupted by a hurricane or tornado. On the other hand, when each element is balanced, the whole system is balanced—just like a beautiful spring day. When we balance the wind energy, we bring stability to the systems of body and mind. And this is how wind energy training results in physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

HOW BREATH OFFERS PEACE OF MIND

We have shown how breath is the main support for life. We have also explained why training in the breath is the essential method for achieving peace of mind for oneself, which enables us to help and support those around us. Finally, we have said that it is through training in wind energy that we can heal and release all physical and mental suffering completely. Ultimately, this is the experience of wisdom, or realization. It is said in the Buddhist teachings that there is no human being who does not wish for happiness, but among all those beings who are wishing for happiness, it is extremely rare to meet a person who actually knows how to find it. Working with wind energy gives us the opportunity to find authentic happiness day and night.

From the point of view of the Buddhist scriptures, an ordinary healthy being takes about 21,600 breaths in a twenty-four-hour period. Western medicine also says that the average number of breaths per day is around 21,000.²⁴ If we practice mindfulness and appreciate training in the breath, we have an incredible number of opportunities to balance the body and mind every day. When we recognize the opportunity that training in the breath provides, we give ourselves a gift: the opportunity to transcend ordinary suffering.

Working with the breath provides us with a unique opportunity for healing because the breath is something that is with us all the time, every moment. It does not matter

whether we are awake or asleep, working or sitting, lying down or doing something active—the opportunity to train in and be mindful of the breath is always with us.

In the Tibetan tradition, not only spiritual realization but other mystical accomplishments such as perpetual youth and extreme longevity arise from training in wind energy. From the point of view of Tibetan Buddhism, if we train diligently in the wind energy until our practice becomes stable and we learn how to calm and purify any agitation that arises, this can lessen symptoms of physical illness, and our lifespan will naturally increase. Also, because we are healthy both inside and out, the color and appearance of our complexion can become youthful and glowing. When we are mentally and emotionally balanced and healthy, it shows.

Usually, when we think about how to make ourselves happy, we seek something on the outside, an external object or event. We look for something that we think will complete us; “If I only had ‘this’ I would feel better.” But when we train in wind energy, we do not need to look for anything outside of us. We do not need to go to the store and buy anything to make ourselves feel less empty, lacking, or unhappy. We do not need to turn on our laptops, televisions, or video games to distract us from how we feel, because we are able to influence our own sense of physical, emotional, and spiritual balance at any moment by working with the breath. The breath is something that is readily available to us simply because we are human beings. We do not need anything else to qualify. How marvelous!

Finding Stability in Wind Energy Training

What does it mean to gain stability in wind energy training? Someone who has achieved stable and balanced wind energy is someone who has a steadfast and even-tempered mental state. Although steady, that person is not stubborn. They are mentally flexible, patient, and not easily disturbed or agitated—like a large body of water without a lot of movement on the surface. Not only would that person’s mental state be pliant and balanced but they would also be calm, relaxed, and healthy.

How many of us can describe ourselves this way? Be honest. We like to project a sense of confidence and well-being to others. And when we perceive others, we have the tendency to think that they are happier, more confident, and less neurotic and agitated than we are. However, when we honestly assess our own state of mind, most of us have the tendency to be emotionally imbalanced in one way or another, whether that tendency manifests as being sharp-tongued and impatient, withdrawn, or generally dissatisfied and skeptical. Whenever the mind is dominated or overwhelmed by a particularly strong pattern of thoughts or emotions, many different kinds of physical and mental sufferings ensue.

For example, some of us experience imbalance as the tendency for worry and anxiety. Our wind energy is so consistently unstable that we have become accustomed to the feeling of instability. The moment we feel calm in the mind, our wind energy immediately becomes unbalanced again and manifests as worry and anxiety. We all know people who have this tendency, or we have this tendency ourselves: it's as if we simply need something to worry about. We may think to ourselves, "I don't have any reason to be worried about this," but we find we are unable to stop. The reason we are unable to stop these mental patterns is that we have become comfortable with, and in some cases addicted to, the feeling of elemental instability, of unstable wind energy. At times, we can feel frightened or hesitant to go beyond our ordinary mode of being.

Why Wind Energy Training Is for Everyone

Based on everything we have learned so far, then, it seems that training in wind energy and attempting to balance the elements within the physical body is not something that only Buddhists should focus on. Western science and Buddhist philosophy agree that calm, relaxed breathing makes us healthier. Because the breath is such an excellent and abundant support for life and vitality for every being on the planet, everyone can benefit from training in the breath, working with the inhalation and exhalation.

THE POSITIVE RESULTS OF PRACTICE

One of the positive effects of wind energy training is that the number of times we need to breathe in one day lessens. We may notice this when we sit down to meditate often and become mindful of the breath; there will be gaps of time where we do not need to breathe. In the case of accomplished or realized practitioners who have trained in any style of breath practice from one of the traditions of Asia, including Qigong, Tai Chi, and Yantra Yoga, the number of breaths taken in one hour can become very few. The result of such practice is clarity and peace of mind, and unshakable physical health. Why is this?

Western medicine answers this question in part by noting that ill people need to breathe more often than healthy ones.²⁵ However, this does not explain why breathing less often also benefits our mental and emotional health. The Tibetan tradition often uses metaphors to explain such complex or intuitive ideas, which can be difficult to understand through more direct means. In this case, if we compare the energy of the physical body to a body of water, then we can access the logic behind this statement.

Each time a gust of wind blows over the ocean, ripples and waves cause movement and agitation on the water's surface. However, when the air is calm, so is the water. It

is just so with the mind. The more often we breathe, the more agitated the energy of body and mind becomes. By breathing less frequently, we begin to achieve elemental harmony. This is exactly how it is, in the case of a great yogi—as the number of breaths in a minute, an hour, a day begins to lessen, the wind energy becomes increasingly stable and balanced. Feelings of extreme mental suffering become less and less over time, so much so that the potential exists for these feelings to completely disappear. This is one way of describing the experience of realization, which will be explored more in later chapters.

Additionally, from the point of view of the Tibetan Buddhist teachings, there are 424 classes of illness that can arise in the body. According to these teachings, because of the lessening of the number of breaths, the wind energy within the body becomes more stable, more even and relaxed, and this releases all classes of illnesses from the physical body as well.

Throughout history, the majority of the great yogis in the world, no matter what other practice they were training in, accompanied their practice with an aspect of wind energy training, or breath yoga. Although the specific techniques of breath yoga used by these yogis may have been different, they each had the common result of self-healing the body and mind and the achievement of longevity. Their lives imply that the qualities of physical and mental well-being are directly connected to wind energy training.

Of course, we may not all be able to attain the realization of a buddha or become a great sage in this lifetime, but wind energy training can still benefit us tremendously. Wind energy training not only results in extraordinary wisdom and realization, as described above, but it also results in ordinary worldly wisdom. When we have the qualities of calm and relaxation in body, speech, and mind, we are able to accomplish more, and with better-designed plans. We make clear and thoughtful decisions and have more harmonious relationships. We avoid doing things that are at odds with our personal goals and integrity, and do not sabotage our own growth. We avoid making impulsive decisions, or speaking impulsive words, ones we may regret later. When we lack chaos on the inside, the world outside reflects our sense of inner harmony.

If we train in wind energy, each of us has the ability both to discover a more joyful life here and now and, ultimately, to cultivate wisdom.

Working with Breath and Neurotic Mind

THE MIND'S FUNDAMENTAL nature is not neurotic and emotionally afflicted. It is of limitless kindness and compassion. However, because we have become so used to the experience of mental and emotional instability, we rarely catch a glimpse of this fundamental nature. In this chapter we will get a sense of how our habitual and unexamined patterns of thought are directly linked to our breathing, and drive our reactions in life, leading to happiness or unhappiness. We will also learn about how wind energy influences our state of mind moment by moment.

SELF-ATTACHMENT AND SELF-ACCEPTANCE

From the point of view of the general Buddhist teachings, the basis for neurotic mind, or the dualistic mind that is overpowered by emotions and thoughts, is self-attachment. It can also be called *self-cherishing*. We may feel that the word *neurosis* only applies to extreme emotions and thought patterns. However, from the point of view of Tibetan Buddhism, neurosis is any trace of self-attachment or afflictive emotion. Until we completely realize the nature of wisdom, we all possess neurotic mind.

True awareness of our own self-attachment and self-cherishing is elusive. We often do not feel like we love ourselves at all. In fact, many of us feel we do not even like ourselves. We may be inclined to self-deprecation, insecurity, and feeling that we are never good enough. However, feelings of insecurity and undervaluing ourselves like this can be self-attachment in disguise. In other words, they can cause us to turn inward and be focused on ourselves, rather than focusing on supporting others and the greater community. This lack of confidence and disparaging of ourselves can make us emotionally and spiritually unavailable; we become isolated and distant from our friends and family, failing to offer them support in their time of need.

Because these feelings are so prevalent within our culture, the idea of self-acceptance has come to the forefront of emotional and spiritual healing. And self-acceptance, when it is not self-attachment in disguise, is also an important part of the Buddhist teachings. Accepting ourselves for who and what we are right now helps us make changes in our lives; we can understand both our capabilities and our limitations and ultimately transcend them. We can let go of the past and focus on what we are doing right now. With an attitude of self-acceptance, we can forgive ourselves for

mistakes made in the past and the part we played in those situations.

Often, we focus on “what is wrong with us,” but true self-acceptance is not just about accepting our shortcomings. All human beings possess many wonderful qualities as well. From the point of view of the Buddhist teachings, we all have the ability to be loving and compassionate. We all have the ability to change and improve on the qualities and abilities we have now. We are all worthy of the love and affection of others. This is part of our underlying nature, which the Buddhist teachings describe as “basic goodness.” This basically good nature is something that all beings possess simply as a result of being alive. The Buddhist teachings give the example that even terrifying, carnivorous animals such as lions and tigers are basically good, because they care for and would even give their lives for their offspring.

The Buddhist teachings also state that we all have what is called *Buddha Nature*. Buddha Nature is something that dwells within all of us: it is the mind’s potential to express wisdom. *Wisdom* here refers not only to the qualities of worldly intelligence and knowledge that make us adept and successful at dealing with life’s problems, but it also refers to a nondual, altruistic state of mind that is not limited in any way. Such a mental state is difficult to imagine because it is completely beyond our ordinary experience. But from the point of view of the Buddhist teachings, we do not need to do anything to possess this quality. Like basic goodness, Buddha Nature is something we have inside of us naturally, simply because we are alive.

STATE OF MIND IS AN EXPRESSION OF THE BREATH

We have a tendency to think that what we see in the world outside of us is actually, objectively real. But the world that we see outside of us is a reflection of our own minds. We may question the truth of this statement, but it does make sense when we reflect on our past experiences. In hindsight, we realize that different choices were available to us, even though we could not see those choices then. As the saying goes, “If I had known then what I know now” We have all reflected on the past in this way, and this normal thought pattern that we all engage in demonstrates that our experiences are indeed subjective, not objective. Everything that we experience is colored by the mental ideas, filters, perceptions, and beliefs that we have at any given moment. Although we may have brief moments of calmness and clarity, the great majority of our time is spent reacting to situations and people around us based on how we feel. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, it is taught that how we feel and our mental state are directly related to how we breathe, and the quality of our wind energy.

Logically speaking, this connection between our state of mind and our breathing seems to hold some merit. Most of us are aware that when the breath is relaxed, the

mind and temperament are relaxed. But how does the wind energy push those deep thoughts and emotions to the surface? As it turns out, we are much more familiar with this phenomenon than we might expect.

One example many of us are familiar with is the strong urge to act out our emotions when we are upset. Through the lens of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, this is a direct result of unstable wind energy. For example, when we feel agitated, angry, or impatient, hot wind energy arises and gathers below the rib cage around the heart; we often express anger at whoever is in front of us, regardless of whether that person is connected to how we feel at all. We blurt out more than we mean to say because this accumulated wind energy in our chest makes us incapable of keeping our feelings inside and making decisions about what we would like to communicate. Likewise, when sadness and despair arise, we can become overwhelmed. We start to feel numb and disconnected from others or ourselves, even failing to take care of our basic needs. The feeling of anxiety, or mental obsession, is also fueled by wind energy. When we are overcome by this expression of wind energy, we may feel that we need to do something, anything, no matter what it is. As a result, we often make rash and impulsive decisions that we later regret. In these cases, imbalance in the wind energy leads to an imbalance in the mind, which manifests as imbalance in ourselves, our environment, and our relationships. The outer is a reflection of the inner.

So-called “high” wind energy—which occurs when wind energy builds up high in the chest instead of dwelling deep within the abdomen and belly—can also cause us to perpetuate self-destructive patterns. We may know that bad things happen when we act in a certain way. We may want to avoid these negative outcomes, and even anticipate how emotionally unmanageable our lives will become if we create a chaotic situation. Yet, agitated wind energy fuels our thoughts, driving us until we act out on our impulses and create the exact situation in our lives that we wish to avoid. It seems like we cannot help ourselves. Propelled by the power of the wind energy, we feel powerless to change.

WORKING THROUGH RESISTANCE

While self-acceptance is harmonious with spiritual principles, again we should not confuse this with self-attachment. Self-attachment reflects the attitude that we are sufficient as we are; accordingly, it generates the fundamental belief that we need not change. This opposition to change can, and often does, come under the guise of self-acceptance. However, having patience, tolerance, and compassion toward ourselves is not the same thing as believing that we are perfect just as we are. Our resistance to change is not just a mental and emotional habit. It is also tied to our wind energy and

how we breathe, since our breathing patterns are also habituated and respond to inner and outer stimuli. We can start to see more clearly how balancing the wind energy creates balance in the body and mind, which then manifests as balance in our daily lives.

Avoiding a Life of Disharmony

In the West, our sense of individualism makes it seem that it is better to go it alone in many situations. We may feel suffocated by the idea of conforming to the wishes of others, and that others should accept us for who we are, just as we are. When we have conflict with others, we are often unwilling to look in the mirror and see what part we have played. The Buddhist teachings tell us that listening to others, responding to their thoughts and feelings, and being willing to accept responsibility rather than blaming others creates a sense of inner and outer harmony. However, in the West, the value placed on individualism and utilitarianism teaches us that to focus on our own desires is paramount, and we must do whatever is necessary to achieve the desired end. This self-important focus brings imbalance to both our inner and our outer lives.

How does this imbalance show up in our lives? When we make a habit of considering ourselves first and focusing on our own wants, needs, and feelings, we often act alone. At times, we disregard or ignore the wishes and needs of others to better carry out what we want. This can cause us to feel lonely and isolated. This same tendency of putting our own wishes before others can also express itself as unwillingness to compromise, damaging our relationships and dividing us from others. In other words, the imbalance on the inside that arises from focusing so much on our own needs and self-attachment manifests on the outside as a lack of community and connection. Despite this, we may genuinely feel justified in not changing a bit. Although we may feel justified in doing things our own way, the real question is: does “being right”—that is, making up our minds and sticking with that decision—make us happy?

When we first take up the Buddhist path, one of the first instructions we receive is to reflect on how we are like others. This can be difficult to appreciate. After all, much of Western culture not only focuses on differences, it shines a spotlight on them. Noting differences can be wonderful tools for eliciting our talents and unique ideas, but a sense of harmony and the humanity we share with others may be lost. It can be difficult to look at others and imagine that they have any of the same thoughts and feelings that we have. Many of us suffer from the feeling that no one in the world can understand our experience, because it is so unique. Cultivating empathy is far more challenging without first believing—or seeing—that we are each essentially the same

as all other beings.

We are all more alike than we think we are, even if, person by person, we have very specific differences. Despite the differences we have in personality, culture, gender, education, and socioeconomic status, Mahayana Buddhism teaches that all beings equally wish to be happy and to be free from suffering. So, at the most fundamental level, we have something in common with every living creature in the universe. Reflecting on this helps us create relationship and balance—cutting through our own feelings of being too special and different to be understood, feelings that divide and isolate us from others.

When we take up a spiritual way of life, looking to create balance both in the mind and in the environment around us, we must cultivate the attitude of being willing to change; to work with ourselves, others around us, and our environment. Many of us believe we are willing to change. But when confronted with a painful or difficult situation, we revert back to our deeply rooted patterns and justification in being who we are. We even think to ourselves, “There’s nothing I can do. That’s just how I am.” We feel that “how we are” is beyond our control. Deeply ingrained in the mind, this is one of the strongest roots of Western neurosis. We feel that we do not need to change, or that we cannot change, even though we know that our inability to change is making us miserable. The truth is we have cherished ourselves so much, we are so attached to the way we are, despite whether or not it makes us happy, that we do not know how to change. We feel powerless.

Becoming Flexible

There are many reasons that we hold on to the belief that we are unable to change, or need not change. Change terrifies us. We fear facing the unknown. Our minds will fill in the blanks for us, creating dreadful scenarios. We are often unhappy and dissatisfied with our own lives, but we prefer the security of what we have now to what we might have if we make a change. Often our well-meaning thoughts of self-acceptance become a force of stagnation, of avoiding change, and of rationalizing why we should keep on doing things just as we have.

When we are too attached to the way we are, we make ourselves rigid and uncompromising. When we lack flexibility, we are unable to respond to people and situations around us and to shed the unhealthy habits that cause our suffering. Wind energy training is a tool we can implement to cultivate flexibility. We become more able to respond in a balanced, thoughtful, and deliberate manner in each and every situation. When we draw upon wind energy training and develop awareness of our respiratory patterns, we can influence and even change them over time, bringing

physical, emotional, and mental transformation. Wind energy training also brings balance and relaxation to body and mind. If we are willing to work with the breath and retrain our minds as well as how we breathe, we will find that fear will loosen its deadly grip on us and we can finally relax.

Riding the Wind Energy of the Neurotic Mind

In philosophical terms, Tibetan scriptures refer to neurotic mind as the impure or afflicted mind. But within the context of wind energy, neurotic mind is not just caused by self-attachment. The mind is also propelled by the movement of wind energy. The Tibetan language describes this relationship between the wind and the mind as the *wind-mind* (Tib. *rlung sems*). This compound word describes the wind energy and the conceptual mind as always intertwined and moving together—a singular motion. Again, a metaphor is helpful to understand how the mind and the wind work together. The Tibetan Buddhist teachings compare the mind and the breath to a rider and its mount. In this metaphor, the wind energy is the mount and the mind is the rider. This metaphor illustrates how it is the wind energy that carries the mind and that influences and shapes the mind's energy. The wind energy is the root of all of our experience, since it provides energy for the mind's movement. So, wind energy training is a powerful tool for purifying, calming, taming, and relaxing the wind energy to impact the expression of neurotic mind.

Many of us work hard every day to deal with the neuroses that emerge as a result of the impure wind-mind. Dealing with our difficulties and unhappiness in this way, we often look for something (or someone) outside of ourselves to blame for the way we feel. When we search for people and situations to blame, we can easily find many circumstances or people in the past who, we feel, did not meet our needs, or teach us healthy behavior, or treat us in the way that we deserved. But even if these thoughts are true, from the point of view of the Buddhist teachings, analyzing the past will not move us beyond suffering. And although we can get some relief from expressing our emotions, the simple act of expressing emotions cannot fully release us from the bonds of suffering. When we do this, it is as though we are treating the symptoms of a disease rather than the illness itself.

Some schools of modern psychology, such as cognitive therapy, recognize that looking for outer sources of emotions and emotional moods may not be helpful at alleviating mental and emotional imbalance. Rather, cognitive therapy focuses on the thoughts themselves as creating our moods. Similar to instruction given in some general meditation techniques, patients learn to recognize that the way they interpret situations around them is based on pervasive thought patterns. Because the mind often

distorts, interprets, and spins events and situations, cognitive therapists teach their patients to recognize that whatever thought arises in the mind is just a thought. And thoughts often do not reflect reality.¹ Learning not to grasp thoughts and feelings so hard and letting go of looking for a source—in other words, not searching for something outside of ourselves to blame for our moods and feelings—can alleviate some of our suffering.

However, wind energy training takes the purification of emotions and habitual thought patterns a step farther. Effective wind energy training, as will be taught in part 2, works with what is beneath the expression of strong emotions: the impure wind-mind. It deals with what is arising right now, at this very moment. After all, we can only deal with our mind as it is currently, in the present. When we calm the wind, we calm the mind.

PURITY AND IMPURITY

Both the pure and the impure aspects of our wind energy have been with us right from the beginning. In the Tibetan texts that describe the philosophy of medicine and meditation, the body is described as having not only a physical aspect, our “physical body,” but also an energetic aspect, the “energy body.” Tibetan texts describe the energy body as being a series of channels that are either pure or impure; in other words, they can carry either pure wind energy or impure wind energy. *Purity* refers to the aspect of wisdom, and *impurity* refers to neurotic or ordinary dualistic mind.

The sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, the two aspects of the autonomic nervous system according to Western medicine, are the closest comparison we can draw to the Tibetan idea of the channels that run throughout the body. It is not a perfect analogy, because the two medical systems do see some aspects of body and mind differently. However, the nervous system has functions that resemble the concept of the channels. For example, like the channels, the nervous system carries the body’s energy and impulses to the tissues and organs in different parts of the body. And as we have seen, working with the breath can regulate the sympathetic nervous system to reduce agitation and stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system to invite relaxation. The breath brings the energy of our entire system into balance.

From the point of view of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, the channels carry the wind energy throughout the body to all of the tissues and organs, including the brain. We tend to live in our neurotic mind, which, as explained above, always has at least some trace of impurity, agitation, and imbalance. Because we tend to be habituated to the impure aspect of wind-mind, however, it can dominate both our mind-set and the body’s energy.

Pure wind energy naturally resides within the body and some of the energy channels. However, pure wind energy is overpowered and weak because the impure wind energy is the primary traveler through our channels. Although pure wind energy is present within the body and mind, it cannot express itself. We cannot see or feel it. So our experience is dominated by the aspect of impure wind-mind. As we have already seen, this impure wind energy is not only the basis for improper behavioral breathing; it is also perpetuated by improper breathing. The relationship between unhealthy breathing and the impure wind-mind is also self-perpetuating; it takes on a life of its own.

Tibetan Buddhist philosophy also illustrates a strong relationship between how extreme states of mind manifest and how the impure wind moves through the energy channels. When the channels themselves are impure, they are knotted or twisted rather than running straight through the body, causing extreme types of imbalances. The Tantras state that when wind energy gets caught in the twists and turns of the channels, our energy is varied, erratic, and unpredictable in the same way that a turbulent river runs through extreme twists and turns. However, when a yogi eradicates the very last traces of neurotic mind and realizes the nature of wisdom, the channels are unknotted, untwisted, and unblocked.

KARMA AND WIND ENERGY

Another way that the Tibetan Buddhist teachings describe impure wind energy is with the phrase *karmic wind*, or *le lung* (Tib. las rlung). The teachings tell us that in order to tame our neurotic mind, we must dispel the karmic wind from the lungs, where it generally dwells. This enables us to experience a softer, more natural type of breath called *wisdom-wind*, which naturally abides in the heart. These two names point out two aspects of the wind energy: that which is “karmic” is impure, or related to the aspect of ordinary, conceptual mind; and that which is “wisdom” is pure, or related to the aspect of wisdom that is hidden, but dwelling inside of us.

But what does it really mean to describe the wind energy as *karmic wind*? First, let’s think of what our ordinary understanding of karma is. Most people have a sense that what they do will come back to them—the Golden Rule. When we do good for others, we have a feeling that others will also care for us. And likewise, when we harm others or create chaos in our relationships, we feel that, one way or another, our actions will come back to haunt us.

Another way we understand karma is similar to fate. In our ordinary language, we can use the word *karma* to describe something happening outside of us, or happening to us, that we feel we have no control over. When an unpleasant situation arises, we

shrug our shoulders and say, “That’s my karma,” meaning, “There’s nothing I can do about it.” But this view of karma is limited; for someone practicing wind energy training, neither of these is a proper understanding of how karma interacts with the body, the mind, and the breath.

Every situation that manifests in our lives arises from causes and conditions coming together at that moment in time. These causes and conditions represent the confluence of a multiplicity of circumstances—people, places, energy, and events. We could also say that the experiences we are having right now are the interaction of the karma we have already accumulated in the past and the karma we are accumulating in the present.

Three Types of Karma

Generally speaking, it can be helpful to think about karma in three different ways. From the point of view of the Buddhist teachings, some karma was accumulated countless lifetimes ago and is just now ripening in this life’s body, speech, and mind. Other karma was accumulated in this particular lifetime and will ripen in this or a future lifetime. But we are also accumulating karma in this very moment. This presently accumulating karma is based on our perceptions, responses, and beliefs about all of the experiences that are currently appearing before us and happening to us.

All types of karma, without exception, can be purified by working with wind energy training. The purification of karma with wind energy training is like damming a river so it can no longer flow. Of course, the effects of damming take time to see; the purification of karma is the result of committed, long-term wind energy training as well as the practice of meditation in general.

Purifying Karmic Cycles

What drives our perceptions, responses, and beliefs? According to Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, the wind-mind does. Although we are not accustomed to thinking of our perceptions, responses, and beliefs in this way, they are all shaped and influenced by our previously accumulated karma. So, the wind-mind could be more precisely described as the “karmic wind-mind.” This is because the wind-mind is constantly expressing karma accrued in the past, and it also acts as the mechanism for accumulating karma moment by moment as we interact with our responses and perceptions.

How is it that we accumulate karma? When the karmic wind agitates the mind, the

agitated mind expresses a strong thought or emotion that we grasp onto and respond to. The five root afflicted states of mind, also called *the five poisons*—ignorance, attachment or desire, anger, pride, and jealousy—all arise moment by moment. When, based on the wind-mind, such an emotion arises and the mind grasps onto it, we accumulate karma in the style of that particular emotion. For example, when we grasp onto or reinforce the experience of greed, we add energy to that mental and emotional tendency. Our grasping and response to the wind-mind is like an imprint, which makes the neurotic habits of the mind stronger and stronger. As we perpetuate this cycle, the wind energy becomes more and more agitated and coarse, and our habits become stronger and stronger. We begin to develop karmic patterns, or responding in a habitual way to the karmic patterns we have already developed in the past, which continue to reinforce and harden them.

This idea of creating and reinforcing patterns is not foreign to Western scientific thought. For example, neuromuscular memory, motor learning, and emotional memory all develop on the basis of patterns. In these cases, patterns develop because our neurons become accustomed to firing in a certain way. Over time, this becomes the path of least resistance, like a well-worn trail in the woods. The behavior that relies upon these patterns can become an unconscious habit.

A few simple examples: how many of us think about the gestures we make while driving a car, or typing on the computer. When we try to think about what we are doing, it becomes harder to do what we ordinarily do naturally and with ease. The fact that our habits are so strong is why we have to consciously and effortfully work to change our habitual patterns. Sustained effort is essential for making a change, because we have to create new patterns and stronger pathways to override our established ways of acting and reacting.

Wind energy training is a key tool for overriding these habitual patterns. These practices are not just about relaxing the body and mind, and not simply about bringing the elements into balance so that we become more physically and emotionally healthy. They are also about purifying karma on a moment-by-moment basis. When we engage in wind energy training, we are working with our karmic patterns and deeply ingrained habits. Although it is true that there is nothing we can do to stop the ripening of karma in our lives at this moment, we can change our experience of karma by changing our state of mind, which also changes our future karmic patterns. The specific wind energy training techniques taught in chapters 4 through 7 can help us to intervene in our habituated patterns by introducing abdominal breathing, lowering our respiratory rate, and alleviating stress.

We can see that this is true by taking the example of two different people in the same set of circumstances and observing how differently they experience and react to

that situation. For example, most people are agitated by places that are crowded, noisy, and busy, such as a subway station. We become impatient and frustrated. We prefer to be in a calm and relaxed environment, because the outer environment makes it easier to calm and relax the mind. However, for a person who practices wind energy training, calm and relaxation come from the inside because of repeated awareness of the breath, the use of abdominal breathing, and the ability to influence the respiratory rate. As a result, the wind energy practitioner in the same crowded subway station does not feel impatient, frustrated, or overwhelmed by the noise and all of the people. That practitioner brings the calm and stability within the mind into the environment around him or her. It is not the outer environment that determines how he or she feels but the quality of the wind-mind itself. This illustrates the most empowering point of all: the key to our own experience lies within our bodies all the time. We need not look outside of ourselves to find peace or to resolve conflicts. We have the power to do that within ourselves.

BECOMING SKILLFUL

In a well-known story from the Buddhist scriptures, the question is asked, “If the ground around you was covered with thorns, how would you best protect your feet?” The answer is given in several ways, to illustrate the varying dispositions of spiritual practitioners. One answer is, “I would attempt to cover the ground around me with leather, so that no matter where I walked, the soles of my feet would not be torn open.” This method is not only impossible but it takes so much effort. We are constantly trying to control and influence the world around us so that what we perceive with our five senses does not bother us so much. The more skillful answer is, “I would make myself a pair of very thick-soled shoes so that no matter where I walk, I will be okay with whatever I encounter.”

Purifying the wind energy is similar to putting on a pair of shoes so we aren't constantly pricked by thorns when we walk. The mind's experience of “thorns” is eradicated by purifying the impure wind-mind so that we don't need to exercise control over our environment and the people in our lives, such as covering the thorny ground. We don't need to shield ourselves from being hurt. Instead, we work at bringing the mind into balance so that we can deal with whatever life brings us.

Another possible answer to the question might be, “I would dig up the roots of the plant so it can no longer grow.” In other words, by looking for the root of the problem, we can try to eradicate it so it does not arise again. Delving into the “earth” of the past to address “root” issues can provide us with some relief, but it requires a lot of effort. And the relief offered is not complete. After all, it is not possible to completely

control the environment around us so that we cannot be hurt by anything; nor is it possible to dig up the roots of each neurosis that arises in the mind so that we won't be overpowered by it. And often we are not observant enough to make sure that we dig up each and every one. We simply do not have that much control over our own minds and the world around us.

As we transition toward becoming individuals more able to care for our own emotional needs, it benefits us to take up a practice like wind energy training. Once we master some of the techniques presented in later chapters, we can more skillfully deal with strong emotions and difficult situations moment by moment, each time the breath arises.

Understanding the Connection of Breath to Stress, Anxiety, and Depression

APPROACHING PHYSICAL, mental, and emotional health from the point of view of the five elements and wind energy brings us to a new level of understanding the interconnection between body and mind. Through learning about wind energy, we have seen that we are each made up of intricately interrelated levels of physical, psychological, and emotional energy. This means that though we talk about the physical body as a discrete entity, we can never completely separate it from the mind and the emotions. Because of the body's energetic channels, through which the wind-mind travels, physical health is the support system (and container) for mental and emotional health. And reciprocally, the flow of healthy mental and emotional energy supports a healthy body.

THE BODY-MIND CONNECTION

What causes the more extreme mental and emotional imbalances, such as chronic illness or anxiety? Harmony among the five elements in the body (air, fire, earth, water, and space) is disrupted when one element becomes disproportionately strong or weak in relation to the others. More often than not, stress, caused by a strengthening and increase of the wind element, plays a tremendous role in the development of mental and emotional imbalances. In our society, anxiety and depression are the most common of these imbalances.

Most of us suffer from stress every day. When we do not know how to cope with the physical and emotional results of stress, it affects us in a profound way. Studies show that 90 percent of all doctor visits are related to stress, because stress exacerbates so many medical conditions.¹ Chronic stress contributes to breath-related pulmonary and cardiac disorders such as heart disease, high blood pressure, and hardening of the arteries, the three health conditions that most threaten our mortality.² Research also shows that stress contributes to emotional imbalances such as anxiety and depression.³

Anxiety is the most common class of mental disorder worldwide, affecting millions of people. Anxiety is a broad term and includes panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, phobias, and separation anxiety disorder.

Depression is another prevalent disorder, impacting people in all areas of the world. Depression and anxiety, both fueled by stress, are often seen together. Some research suggests that they are one disorder with two different faces.⁴ In one study, 5 percent of those with major depression were also diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder while 6 percent had symptoms of panic disorder.⁵ Some researchers even suggest that anxiety precedes depression, such that depression may be the result of long-standing anxiety.⁶

This research illustrates the interrelatedness of stress, anxiety, and depression. Even though millions of us are touched by these painful states of mind every day, understanding the imbalances of body and mind in more detail may help take away the power these painful states hold over us. The good news is that through working with the breath, we actually hold the key to helping ourselves bring body and mind into balance.

No matter how out of control we feel, how low our energy is, or how large our problems seem to loom, wind energy training is an effective intervention for all emotional imbalances. When we work with the breath, we work with the root of the problem.

A PROFILE OF STRESS

Stress perpetuates the survival of every species and it is the body's natural response to danger. The release of stress hormones enables us to have almost superhuman responses when they are needed most—like single-handedly lifting a car a few inches off the ground to save the life of a child trapped underneath. When we feel stress, our senses heighten and blood rushes to the major muscles of our arms and legs so we can run or take quick action.

Stress hormones give us a charge of strength and agility. Once these hormones are released, they *do* throw the body and mind out of balance, but this imbalance is necessary to face short-term dangers. Under ordinary circumstances, we physically exert ourselves in order to face the danger. Then, when the immediate danger is no longer present, the chemicals disperse and the system comes back into balance.

But what happens when the danger we face is not immediate? What if the dangers we perceive are actually coming from the mind rather than the world around us? Like every other kind of strong reaction, stress has to do with how we perceive ourselves and the world around us. Most of the time, stress is caused by a fear or mental obsession of some kind, whose presence continually triggers the stress response.

We could respond to this statement by saying that some causes for stress aren't just

tricks of the mind. There is actual, real suffering that each of us experiences in our lives. However, as we will discuss in later chapters, if we are spiritually healthy, if we have thoroughly contemplated the impermanent nature of all phenomena—including ourselves as well as our loved ones—and if we have accepted that there is no way for any living being to avoid the experience of suffering, then even the ordinary suffering of our lives need not be cause for stress. Instead, we can bravely face what unfolds in our lives with patience and acceptance.

Stress causes problems when the chemicals released into the blood have no chance to disperse, such as when we experience the non-life-threatening stresses of ordinary life, like fighting with a friend or loved one or getting cut off in traffic. For the most part, these ordinary stressors do not require a physical response. When we do not physically exert ourselves to resolve a “dangerous” situation, it takes longer to restore the balance between the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. This is because stress hormones do not disperse quickly without physical exertion. Additionally, when a stressor is mentally relived as part of a cyclical thought pattern, then the same stress is perceived over and over again, and the body does not get adequate time to relax, rebalance, and reset itself.

When stress hormones remain present in the blood over a period of time, the system falls out of balance and stays that way. Our heart rate increases and we tend to hold our breath.² As a result, we are unable to breathe deeply, and we engage in short, shallow thoracic breathing. Thus, the same responses that save us from immediate danger can also suppress the immune system, restrict blood flow, and drain us of physical, mental, and emotional energy.⁸

Stress is an imbalance that exacerbates every other extreme tendency. In other words, when we are under stress, it is more likely that we will fall into some other imbalance—whether it be physical illness, anxiety, or depression.

Stress and Western Culture

We experience many kinds of stress because we live in an economically and technologically developed society. Material convenience and a high standard of living make Western life fast-paced and gratification-oriented. We are used to getting what we want when we want it. Technology, such as cellular phones and the Internet, provide us with so much information so quickly that we forget what it is like to have to wait for anything. The high-paced and instantaneous nature of our society may offer us many conveniences, but it also increases our stress level. Research actually shows a higher prevalence of stress-related disorders such as anxiety and depression in economically developed countries. According to the World Health Organization,

unipolar depression was the third most important cause of disease burden worldwide in 2004. Unipolar depression was in “eighth place in low-income countries, but at first place in middle- and high-income countries.”⁹ Estimates of the prevalence of anxiety disorders are also generally higher in developed countries than in developing countries.¹⁰

In developing countries, the majority of the stress that people experience has to do with mere survival. Food, water, and shelter are basic needs that often require daily physical labor. Of course, people do suffer and feel stress as a result of having to work hard despite harsh weather conditions, or if it appears that they will not be able to feed their family in the coming winter. However, people are so busy laboring to support themselves and their families that they have little time to reflect on these feelings.

After meeting such cheerful people relatively unburdened by stress, travelers who visit countries in the developing world often idealize and romanticize life in economically poor societies. We see evidence of this idealization when people who live in affluent countries reject the material world and pledge to live simply. However, if they have not changed their habitual way of thinking, feeling, and responding to inner and outer conditions, this will not bring lasting happiness. There are no shortcuts when it comes to mental and emotional health!

In some ways people are happier in less-developed societies. People from North America or Europe are often shocked by life in countries like India, which seem to run on their own schedule. For example, it is not unheard of to arrive at a rural airport to catch a flight only to find that it has been canceled and rescheduled for an unknown time and date, or to be sold a seat on a train that does not exist. Even in the face of such apparent stressors, local people laugh and smile at these events, and feel relatively undisturbed by the changes of course. Imagine the stress and display of emotion if a flight was canceled in New York City and everyone was told to go home and come back the next day to check when the flight would depart!

Craving a lighthearted mind-set, we tend to ignore the abundance of physical hardship and suffering in less economically developed societies. Lacking technology and medical care, people experience the sweeping sufferings of famine, illnesses associated with unsanitary living conditions and water, and a high infant mortality rate. As we will discuss in later chapters, any particular set of life circumstances brings with it its own suffering. There is no escape from the painful realities of life for any of us.

The economic benefits of life in developed countries mean its citizens are not consumed by thoughts of how to survive. Our main concerns are whether we like the way our lives are going and if what we have seems to be fair and desirable. Because

our basic needs have been met, our desires dominate our minds. In this way, we are both lucky and cursed. Our minds are free to find things to worry about. And this we do, over and over again.

Stress and Societal Roles

Another cause of stress we experience in developed countries has to do with the flexibility of our societies. In most developing countries, the traditional culture is still intact. The traditional culture assigns strict roles to each member of society. In turn, each role in society is associated with a routine and a set style of behavior and conduct.

Take the example of Tibet. Traditionally, people take on the role of being either a monk or a nun, a family caretaker, a nomadic herder, a farmer, or a spiritual retreatant. No matter which role people take on, they understand how their role is to be carried out, and what they should and should not do along the path. Such roles do not allow for much variation, or much individuality. Whatever their role is, it has to be carried out each and every day in the same manner. As a result, there are not a lot of choices to be made. There is not a lot of thinking, “Should I do this?” or, “Should I change that?” They cannot think in this way because they have to carry out their role to survive. If they try to be something or someone else, what will they eat? Where will they live? What part of society will accept them?

This is very different from life in the West, where society itself varies and where we can find a place to fit in no matter who we want to be. If we want to be an artist or a writer, we can join an artist’s community. If we live in an area we feel is too politically conservative, we can go somewhere else that matches our values, rather than trying to make ourselves fit in. Here we are free to allow our minds to wander wherever they want to go, whether or not this mental wandering is healthy or constructive. “Should I sell my house and get a new one? Should I leave my spouse? Should I change my job . . . my friends . . . my religion . . . my diet . . . my wardrobe . . . my hair . . .?” The number of choices we consider day by day, moment by moment, goes on and on. The irony is that we often resent roles and routines, thinking they limit our freedom of choice, when instead it is freedom of choice that often limits our ability to focus our energy.

The Stress of Choices

Our individualistic culture thrives on choice. It is our prerogative to do what we want to do, when we want to do it. We lose touch with the fact that food and rest are

supposed to nourish body and mind so that we are balanced and healthy. Instead, we often eat because it gratifies us or we sleep in because we feel like it. However, sometimes being free to make many choices contributes to the self-perpetuating energy of emotional and physical imbalance. There are so many ideas and possibilities before us that we are not sure which to choose. Uncertainty gives rise to stress and worry. Some research indicates that when we suffer from stress and anxiety, the chemical effect on the brain causes difficulty making connections and processing information, especially related to making choices.¹¹ The inability to choose is exacerbated by the sheer number of choices available to us, adding to the energy and momentum of anxiety.

Other research shows that with increased numbers of choices comes decreased well-being.¹² When we have more choices, we often focus on what seems to be the perfect choice. We find it hard to make a decision, searching for which choice is the best one, and wanting to avoid making the “wrong” choice. The time and mental energy we expend worrying about mundane things, such as which stereo system is best, or which brand of cereal to buy, contributes to our mental exhaustion. Have you ever been overwhelmed by searching for something in particular in the grocery store or the superstore? There are shelves and shelves of different varieties and options to choose from.

As a result, we often feel less satisfied with what we have and regret possibilities not pursued once we realize our choice was not perfect after all. Emotionally, we fail to understand that the end result of any choice we make can never be lasting happiness, because lasting happiness is impossible to achieve except on a spiritual level. Ordinary thoughts and actions cannot help us escape the suffering of the world we live in. Despite making even the best choices, all of the same old unknowns and uncertainties of life remain, and lasting happiness eludes us. No matter how many choices we have at our fingertips, we lack control over life and death. Although we tend to equate choice with freedom, choice alone will never free us from suffering.

Another aspect of choice that can be stressful is that it involves our appearance to the rest of the world. Our self-attachment can grow as a result. Every choice we make is a statement to those around us about “who we are.” Because we are so personally invested in our choices—because we identify with them—we feel even more pressure to make the so-called right choice and even greater regret if we feel we have made the so-called wrong one.

Constantly seeing life through the lens of countless choices can contribute to feeling a lack of stability and continuity in our day-to-day lives. It can also contribute to feeling a lack of purpose and commitment. When we are constantly considering alternatives to what we are doing right now, we may feel unsure about our present

path. With the distraction of many possibilities, staying the course can be difficult. The stress and mental anxiety caused by this thought pattern also fuels other strong physical and emotional responses. As the energy of stress builds up and develops, we begin to worry unnecessarily about things that will never come to pass. We do not feel like ourselves. We lose sleep. We are tense and restless. This, in turn, leads to more stress, and becomes a self-perpetuating cycle.

Stagnation. Physical movement contributes to our physical, mental, and emotional health. But when we think about physical activity, we tend to think about serious exercise, such as running, hiking, or lifting weights. We do not have to run a marathon to bring ourselves more into balance. While physical training does support a healthy body, any kind of movement and any effort that we make toward balancing body and mind will benefit us.

In the past, when our own society was less technologically developed, movement was a part of everyday life. We walked or biked instead of driving everywhere. We did not spend eight to ten hours a day in front of a computer screen, and then time at home in the evening in front of the television. In less economically developed countries, most people are still very active. For example, in Tibet, farmers are out working with the livestock, or nomadic groups are in the process of moving to a new camp. In such countries, staying in bed late and not doing daily chores and activities is not a choice—people have to move! They have to get up even if they are tired, and because they lack machines and technology to do things for them, they have to use their bodies to get things done. The end result is that in these societies, people are in constant motion and the body's energy is not stuck and stagnant.

Without a physical response to stress, the stress hormones released within our bodies take longer to disperse and can accumulate. Stress builds up, and we get stuck in that stressed-out state. This is another way of saying that the energy within the body and the wind-mind cannot move, flow, or adapt properly. Physical movement helps to break down and disperse this stagnant state of body and mind, regardless of the cause of stress. Thus, movement helps to bring us back into balance.

When we think of yogis and retreatants, it may seem like they are not really working with the physical body. We may think that they are just sitting still all the time. But as we will talk about in the next chapter, sacred movement, proper posture, and wind energy training are all forms of movement that provide an important basis for mental, emotional, and spiritual health. Research shows that sacred-movement systems such as yoga reduce the presence of stress-related responses in the body, thereby reducing pain responses as well as the causes for stress-related disorders like anxiety and depression.¹³

Yogis and retreatants work with movement when they practice traditional forms of

Tibetan Yantra Yoga, or engage in prostrations—devotional movements that align and soften the energetic channels in the body. As we will discuss in the next chapter, sacred movement, working with the wind-mind, and purifying the energetic channels are an integral part of a sacred society such as that of Tibet.

Physical rigidity. Notice how your body feels when you get up in the morning. Often, the body is hard and cold, like ice. It hurts when we move, so we do not feel like doing anything. When the body is inflexible, the quality of the body's energetic channels is unnaturally rigid. However, this rigidity doesn't just occur in the morning. It is often part of our daily life, and we carry that rigidity with us throughout the day. When the body and the channels are rigid, the wind-mind cannot move freely, and our energy gets stuck in certain patterns. The rigidity and inflexibility of the body contributes to the cycle of imbalance.

Anxiety. Anxiety is a state of mind brought about by extremely high wind energy: wind energy that is so high it builds upon itself. When we experience anxiety, we overestimate the strength and number of stressors in our environment. As stress becomes chronic and repeated, the increase in the wind element becomes stronger and more pronounced. This disrupts our physical and mental health in more noticeable ways. For example, increased wind fuels racing and obsessive thought patterns that cause us to relive painful or uncomfortable situations. We chase after these thoughts, bringing worry and unease. Our unease gives rise to even greater wind energy, which brings even more thoughts to chase after. Whether or not these thoughts and worries are reasonable, we are so overwhelmed by the energy and the momentum of anxiety that we do not take the time to examine them. We do not, or cannot, dismiss them. Our emotions spin out of control. We long for rest, but the mind, riding the racing energy of the heart-wind, is moving so fast that we cannot seem to calm down. The harder we push ourselves without allowing the body to rest and recharge, the closer we get to a mental or physical breakdown.

Overstimulated mind. We can feel that we are in a state of tremendous motion because of the motion of the wind-mind. Because of the experience of motion, we do not realize that anxiety is actually a state of stagnation, another expression of imbalance that we get stuck in. From a Western medical perspective, anxiety is a cyclic overstimulation of the sympathetic nervous system, or, using the concepts of Tibetan medicine, the buildup of heart-wind. Because of this increase in the wind element, the nervous system is unable to relax and reset itself.

Traditionally, according to Tibetan philosophy, the tendency toward high wind energy, or heart-wind, is more prevalent in intelligent individuals. Wind energy, or the air element, is related to thoughts, creativity, and mental flexibility. With intelligence naturally comes an abundance of thoughts and ideas. Working with wind energy

training can help to relieve the anxiety caused by having an overabundance of thoughts and ideas, not only by helping to calm the sympathetic nervous system but also because it helps us gradually purify and let go of our habitual thought patterns.

When we experience anxiety, we engage in shallow, thoracic breathing, which stimulates the sympathetic nervous system so that we are unable to relax. We are in great need of rest and relaxation because the body's normal mechanism to help us relax is not functioning properly. Even when the anxious body and mind does sleep, that sleep is often disrupted in quality or length, so we rarely feel recharged. Being deprived of rest, we also begin to eat improperly. Without proper rest and nutrition, mental imbalance leads to physical imbalance. As time passes, the body is not capable of sustaining its high energy, so the entire system can collapse and we can experience burnout. The energy of the body becomes heavy and exhausted.

PROFILE OF DEPRESSION

Like anxiety, depression is an imbalance of the air element, as it is accompanied by clouds of negative thoughts. However, depression is also an expression of an imbalance in the earth element. This results in the mental, emotional, and physical heaviness we feel when we are depressed.

From the point of view of Tibetan philosophy, depression is a state of mind that is highly influenced by our attitudes and thought patterns, our breathing, our karma—perhaps some of us might say our deeply ingrained habits—and our day-to-day behavior. And likewise, depression is treatable because contemplative practice and wind energy training address all of these major causes of depression simultaneously.

From the point of view of Western medicine, depression manifests as a result of genetics, environment, nutrition, habits of mind and thought patterns, brain chemistry, and/or physical illness. When enough of these depression-prone factors present—or even a strong dose of one of these factors presents—a depressed state of body and mind can result. There may be no common cause of depression, but there is a common result.

Though the origins of depression vary, depressed individuals share the tendencies of feeling exhausted, defeated, and powerless. When we are depressed, we underestimate our ability to cope with daily stressors. Our outlook on life becomes gloomy, coloring our thoughts and interactions and causing them to spiral out of control. Feeling exhausted and emotionally overwhelmed, our ability to deal with everyday situations is compromised. We often choose to withdraw from everyday life.

Because depression arises from a variety of causes and conditions, it can also be

treated in a variety of ways. Altering brain chemistry with medication clearly helps some people. Exercise has also been shown to be as effective at relieving depression as medication in some studies.¹⁴ But medical research also demonstrates that brain chemistry and function is altered by changes in the way we think! For example, cognitive therapy has been shown to be as effective as medication in the treatment of depression.¹⁵

There are clearly things you can do and practice to benefit your state of mind, regardless of the origin of your depression. Working with one or a combination of the contributing factors of depression helps us to put our energy in motion and create change in body and mind. If depression were solely based on one cause, such as genetics or the chemical balance in the brain, we might be correct in feeling that there is nothing we can do to heal ourselves. But thinking of depression as an imbalance in the elements can be empowering. We each have the ability to bring something that is out of balance back into balance.

We tend to think of anxiety and depression as being very different types of imbalances. However, as we have already learned, depression and anxiety frequently occur together, and depression is often preceded by anxiety. One way to understand this is that the racing thought patterns of anxiety and the continual release of stress hormones tax the system so much that it simply collapses, and can manifest as depression.

From the point of view of wind energy, depression and anxiety are different expressions of the same root. Western medicine has a similar view. For example, anxiety and depression often respond to the same sorts of interventions: cognitive behavioral therapy, medications, yoga, and breath yoga. Additionally, decreased oxygenation of brain cells is implicated in both anxiety and depression, and both conditions are characterized by shallow, thoracic breathing. This suggests that deep abdominal breathing is beneficial to those suffering from anxiety and depression.

How does abdominal breathing benefit us? As we discussed previously, by breathing abdominally, we increase the oxygen available in the blood, and therefore the brain. But also, when we breathe deeply with prolonged nasal exhalation, this action enables the vagus nerve to reset itself.¹⁶ The *vagus nerve* is an aspect of our nervous system that brings equilibrium and balance to the whole. It either stimulates or calms the system, depending on what is needed. Therefore, working with wind energy training actually delivers the necessary antidote to everyone, no matter what type of stress imbalance we suffer from, despite differences in our state of mind and physical health.

IMBALANCE AND THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

Drawing a line between stress and anxiety can be difficult. From the point of view of the five elements, anxiety is merely a stronger expression of stress. It is also challenging to find the line between anxiety and depression, as the two frequently occur together. That is why it makes sense to think of the root of all of these disorders as having a common denominator: *elemental imbalance*.

While Tibetan philosophy describes this common denominator as relating to the elements, Western medicine describes it as an imbalance in our autonomic nervous system.¹⁷ We have already learned that the autonomic nervous system is made up of the complementary interaction of the sympathetic and parasympathetic responses. However, we can add one more component to this to help us understand how the body reacts to different and more extreme forms of stress: *heart rate variability (HRV)*. HRV is an important indicator of both our mental and our physical health.

HRV refers to the variation in our heart rate in response to many different things—emotions and stress; physiological factors such as hormones; and breathing. HRV is part of a feedback loop connecting the heart and brain through the nervous system. A greater variability in HRV points to good health, while decreased variability in HRV is associated with a number of unhealthy states. Even the core mechanisms of the body, such as heart rate, need to be able to adapt to a variety of conditions. As we discussed in the context of movement and energy, stagnation, or a lack of variability, is unhealthy. A lack of variability points to a habitual cycle, reaction, or behavior that may or may not be appropriate under the circumstances. In our own lives, we recognize that a failure to adapt to new circumstances usually brings us mental and emotional suffering, and even illness.

What does HRV have to do with anxiety and depression? Both depression and anxiety are associated with low HRV.¹⁸ This means that both anxiety and depression are characterized by an inflexible and unbalanced autonomic nervous system. The rebalancing of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, which happens each time a healthy individual breathes abdominally, is disrupted. When a healthy person inhales, HRV increases, as the sympathetic nervous system is activated. With exhalation, HRV decreases, due to activation of the parasympathetic nervous system. The sympathetic and parasympathetic systems are actually self-regulating, constantly bringing themselves back into balance.

When we are anxious or depressed, our heart rate has trouble adapting to the constantly changing environment around us. This means that the nervous system, which ordinarily functions dynamically, becomes stuck in a pattern. Through conscious awareness of our breathing, we are able to stimulate the aspect of our nervous system that is underactivated in both anxiety and depression: the parasympathetic nervous

system. We are able to elicit a relaxation response through elongating our exhalation. Proper abdominal breathing, accompanied by exhalation through the nose, supports a healthy balance in our bodily systems.

HRV and the Breath

Frequent shallow breathing, or thoracic breathing, and breathing through the mouth both consistently stimulate the sympathetic (excitatory) nervous system at a low level. This means that for many of us, being stressed out is the ordinary way of being. Even when there is no actual or perceived stress, simply because of our breathing habits, our sympathetic nervous system is overactivated. Not only that, but because our HRV is low when we suffer from depression and anxiety, our parasympathetic nervous system is underaroused. Our body is unable to counter this excited state and calm itself down.

The parasympathetic nervous system is stimulated by slow breathing and prolonged exhalation,¹⁹ such as when we engage in wind energy training. Shallow breathing through the mouth into the chest leads to shorter exhalations, as the volume of air is moved quickly in and out of the lungs. However, when we breathe through the nostrils and into the abdomen, not only do we breathe less frequently but our exhalations are prolonged. What this means is that abdominal nose-breathing not only makes more oxygen available to our bodies in a more efficient manner but it also stimulates the sympathetic nervous system less frequently.

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF STRESS

Wind energy training helps us break the cycle of all stress-related disorders. As we purify and calm the wind-mind through engaging in focused daily practice, we are able to rebalance body and mind and release the mental, emotional, and physical effects of energetic stagnation. Working with the breath as we will learn to do in the chapters that follow helps us to bring the nervous system back into balance and increase our HRV. It brings us into elemental balance, and enables us to approach life with tolerance and acceptance.

Here are some of the ways we can break the cycle of stress and anxiety in our lives:

Cultivate discipline and routine. Routine helps to bring calm and stability to our mind and emotions. This feeling of stability reduces our stress levels. We might develop a daily routine that includes wind energy training and yoga practice. Our routine might include waking up at a consistent time, having set mealtimes, leaving and returning home from work on a schedule, and practicing wind energy training at a

certain time each day. We need not give up all of our choices and restrict all of our activities, but we can find a balance between routine and spontaneity if we make a schedule for certain, important things we do each day. Keeping a daily schedule makes it easier to not get caught in cycles of unhealthy or stagnant energy because we keep ourselves in motion doing things that we know keep us healthy and balanced.

Exercise regularly. Movement, ordinary exercise, and especially yoga help keep body and mind healthy. Along with any extreme state of mind comes the feeling of being stuck in a particular kind of energy. When we engage in physical movement, the basis of the stagnation is dispersed, and our emotional state changes. It is especially beneficial to work with a sacred movement system such as yoga, which is designed to work with the channels and to balance the wind energy. Even if we just do a simple form of exercise such as running, the movement of the body causes the energy of the bodily channels to move. As the channels move, the movement causes the channels to relax and soften. As a result, the wind-mind becomes unstuck and is able to move more freely. In the next chapter, we will learn about the physical aspects of wind energy training, which we can incorporate into our daily routine.

Pay attention to basic needs such as diet and sleep. The Buddhist teachings, as well as medical science, point out how eating and sleeping patterns contribute to imbalanced states of mind. Eating and sleep routines are uniquely tied to our mental outlook. For example, when we have low energy or are emotionally upset, we often eat too much. This can be related to wanting to feel full or feel physically comforted by food. When we eat too much, we often feel heavy and unhealthy, and as a result, this can disrupt our sleep patterns. In the case of a high wind state of mind like anxiety, we often eat too little because we are not able to sit down and focus on eating. Our wind energy can be so high that we do not notice that we are hungry. There is a general lack of awareness of the body's needs because we are so highly stimulated. Be sure to get enough sleep and make thoughtful choices for healthy eating. Avoid eating on the run—plan ahead for meals so you don't find yourself buying takeout on the way home. We can also try to check in with our body several times a day to notice how we feel, or even keep a journal that details what we eat to help us evaluate our nutritional intake.

Relax. We should also take the time to do things that we enjoy, including our spiritual practice! When we are overwhelmed by an emotional imbalance such as anxiety or depression, we often forget, or do not have the energy, to do things that make us feel good. Even if we find we are not able to read, or paint, or do some of the things we normally would do to relax, there is one simple thing that we can do to relax and improve our mental perspective: get out into nature. Some research shows that depression and anxiety are actually relieved by living in close proximity to open,

green space.²⁰ This may be because people who live near open space are more physically active or get more sunlight and vitamin D; however, you do not have to relocate simply because you feel blue. Go outside and get some fresh air, or take a walk around your neighborhood. Take your coffee to the park and read on a blanket in the sun. Walk or ride your bike to the grocery store. Find a short hike close to home. When we relax, the wind energy and the elements in the body naturally begin to bring themselves back into balance.

Make small changes. All of us engage in behavior that we know is not healthy for us, but we do it anyway. We should cultivate an attitude of being willing to put aside and stop these unhealthy behaviors. We will not be able to do it all at once. However, we can make small changes in our behavior that accumulate into a bigger change. For example, we could set our alarm ten minutes early and use that time to not be rushed, or to work at our contemplative practice. Over time, we could increase that amount to fifteen minutes.

Work with health care practitioners. Mental and emotional imbalances have all sorts of causes. Some of them, such as a lack of vitamin D, food allergies, or diet, can be addressed by traditional or naturopathic health care professionals. As stated earlier, we are not doctors, and we believe in taking a holistic approach to all imbalances. We should not leave any potential causes for imbalance unexamined.

Seek spiritual guidance. If we are serious about a contemplative practice or wind energy training, we should seek an appropriate teacher. We should put our time and energy into developing the relationship as well as the spiritual practice. We may connect to spiritual practice by reading books and thereby have a place to start, but without cultivating a relationship with an authentic teacher, our practice will not deepen. When we work with a teacher to develop a consistent contemplative practice, we have the support we need to engage in wind energy training, which will reduce our stress and other imbalances and improve our overall quality of life.

PART TWO

How to Practice Breath Yoga

Basic Wind Energy Techniques

IN THE LAST SEVERAL CHAPTERS, we reflected on the importance of wind energy training to our physical and emotional health. Wind energy training dispels the causes of many serious health problems that are related to a lack of oxygen in the blood, tissues, and major organs. We have also noticed the relationship between wind energy and our emotional state—how our strong feelings and neuroses rise up upon a rush of wind energy, or we can become emotionally stuck when our wind energy is stagnant. Either way, our lack of flexibility can keep us in an unhealthy place.

Now that we have spent some time contemplating the importance of working with the wind energy, we may be feeling inspired to practice. In this chapter, we begin to learn several basic wind energy practices through the three yogas, or practices, of body, speech, and mind. These three yogas are the foundation of wind energy training techniques, and must be mastered before we move on to chapter 5.

SUPPORTING SPIRITUAL HEALTH

First, let's take a look at how physical and emotional health supports our spiritual health. What is spiritual health? After having spent some time reflecting on the difference between self-acceptance and self-attachment (chapter 2), we have gotten a preview to the answer to this question. One way that the Buddhist teachings define spiritual health is having a sense of interconnection with other living beings on the planet, as well as respect for the natural environment. Recognition of this interconnection with others is developed as we call to mind the things that all beings have in common: the wish to attain happiness and avoid suffering. We can reflect on this by thinking that all of the wonderful things we want for ourselves, others want them too. Just so, all of the painful things we would like to avoid, others wish to avoid those things too.

However, spiritual health is far more than a mere sense of connection. True spiritual health arises from discovering love and compassion for all sentient beings. In doing so, we cut through our own painful feelings of anger, resentment, and strong desire, which cause us so much personal unhappiness and sorrow. By bringing ourselves back into harmonious relationship with friends, family, and the larger community, even those we may dislike, we ourselves become spiritually rich.

The Buddhist teachings describe this attitude of love and service toward all beings on the planet as “benefiting both self and others.” Another way of expressing this is to say, “By benefiting others, I actually benefit myself.” When we give to others, such as giving them our time, love, attention, or even our wealth and belongings, we help ourselves by freeing ourselves from our deeply ingrained selfishness. Also, by focusing on the happiness of others, we also often forget our own sorrow and loneliness in the process. For example, we may feel lonely for a close friendship, but when we see someone else enjoying a close friendship and rejoice in that, we often forget our own feelings of sadness. The overall result is that we feel happier and more content. When finding both inner and outer harmony, connection to others and the community are key!

The theme of inner and outer harmony emerges again and again in the context of wind energy training. Spiritual health, or the state of harmony with other beings on the planet as described in Buddhist philosophy, manifests because of inner harmony, calm, and a sense of satisfaction in the mind. And by calming the wind energy in the body, we calm the heart and mind.

HOW TO BEGIN WIND ENERGY TRAINING

The simplest way to begin wind energy training is to begin paying attention to the breath and to become aware of patterns of inhalation and exhalation. We notice how the breath changes in certain situations, and what feelings arise along with those changes in the breath.

Extensive and detailed descriptions for working with the wind energy can be found in Tibetan Buddhist teachings on Yantra Yoga. As stated above, there is no substitute for a master teacher who has had a lifetime of training. What follows in this chapter is only an introduction to this rich Tibetan Buddhist tradition—three aspects of wind energy training:

Training related to the physical body, including posture and the movement of the body, is called *the Yoga of the Body*.

Training related to the wind or the breath includes working with the breath itself, as well as the pervasive movement of the wind energy throughout the body. This is called *the Yoga of Speech*. However, in the context of this book, we will refer to it as *the Yoga of Wind*.

Finally, training related to the mind is called *the Yoga of Mind*.

Reflecting on the relationship between body, speech, and mind, we can see that the mind is the king of the body and speech. Any expressions of the body and speech

originate in the mind. When we work with the body and wind, our goal is to bring harmony, calm, and compassion to the mind. In doing so, we appease all three aspects of the wind energy.

Yoga of the Body

Yoga of the body, the physical movement and posture aspects of wind energy training and meditation practice, is very important. *The Wish-Fulfilling Treasury*, a famous text by the great Yantra Yoga master Longchen Rabjam (1308–64), describes the yoga of body in depth. This text tells us that engaging in physical yoga postures, or asanas, right before doing any wind energy training, is beneficial. Practicing asanas opens the energetic channels in the body. In the Tibetan tradition, there is a specific set of twenty asanas that are done before practicing wind energy training. When Tibetan yogis and yoginis go into caves or isolated mountain hermitages after making a serious commitment to stay in solitary retreat, they train seriously in these twenty asanas. The reasoning is that when the body's disposition is natural and relaxed, the energetic channels in the body are also natural and relaxed. In turn, this relaxes the wind energy and the wind-mind.

We recommend practicing yoga asanas for fifteen to twenty minutes before sitting down to work with the wind energy. Here in the West, instruction in many different styles of physical yoga is readily available. All of these styles incorporate an aspect of working with the breath, and will serve the purpose of opening and softening the channels. It is perfectly fine to choose any physical yoga tradition that one finds appealing. Practicing a set sequence of asanas would be impractical, since each person has different physical abilities. Basic wind energy training is a practice that any person can work with. For that reason, we have not specified particular asanas to work with, though we do recommend a period of physical yoga practice preceding wind energy practice.

Physical Posture: The Seven-Point Posture of Vairocana

The physical posture is an important support for practicing wind energy training.

Experienced Tibetan Buddhist practitioners are already familiar with what is called the Seven-Point Posture of Vairocana, or simply the Seven-Point Posture. The “seven points” refer to seven details of the posture, and each one has a specific benefit or support role for calming the mind and readying the practitioner for wind energy training. Additionally, each has a direct relationship to the wind energy that naturally resides in different areas of the body.

The seated posture. The first point tells us how we should sit. Traditionally, we are instructed to sit in full lotus posture. However, many of us are not capable of sitting in full lotus because we did not train ourselves to sit that way from childhood. If we are unable to sit in full lotus posture, we should work toward sitting in *Sattva posture*. *Sattva* is a Sanskrit word meaning “hero,” a spiritual hero who works for the benefit of others. Because it is less physically demanding than full lotus posture, most of us will be able to sit in Sattva posture if we work at it over time. Sattva posture is done differently by males and females, but both can begin by sitting cross-legged on the floor. Elevating the hips so that they rest above the knees makes the posture easier to hold, so we may choose to sit on a pillow or cushion. For males, the left leg is tucked in closer to the body and the left foot placed on the inner right thigh, while the right leg rests in the front. For females it is the opposite: the left leg rests in the front and the right leg is tucked, with the right foot resting on the inner left thigh. This posture is similar to a half lotus posture, except that one leg rests in front of the body for balance.

The placement of the hands. Ordinarily the palms rest on the thighs; however, there is another technique we can use called *vajra fists*. To make vajra fists, touch each thumb to the bottom of the corresponding ring finger, and then curl up the remaining fingers around it so it makes a fist. The fists are pressed into the crease of the thighs with the backs of the hands pressing downward and the thumbs facing away from the body. We can choose whichever hand position is comfortable for us.

The alignment of the back. One of the most important aspects of the seated posture is for the vertebrae to be as straight as an arrow, such that one vertebra is stacked upon another. Having a straight spine is essential to our posture, the practice of meditation, and wind energy training in general. If we cannot straighten the spine when sitting on the floor, we can sit on a chair instead.

The set of the shoulders. The shoulders should be set back like the wings of a vulture. Many of us have not seen vultures often enough to visualize what this instruction means. A vulture has a tremendous wingspan, and its wings are able to stretch out perfectly straight. Just so, our shoulders should roll back and open, or widen, so that they mimic the vulture’s broad back and wingspan. When the vertebrae are stacked straight, the shoulders naturally roll back and are set wide.

The placement of the chin. The chin is slightly tucked in toward the neck to better invite a slightly downward-turned gaze.

The placement of the tongue. The tongue touches the roof of the mouth, resting naturally above the teeth.

The direction of the gaze. The eyes are open and the line of vision grazes the top of the nose. The eyes are open, natural, and unmoving.

The Seven-Point Posture supports an important aspect of wind energy training: to bring the wind energy that is dispersed throughout the body into the energetic “central channel,” which runs like a pillar through the center of the body. What is the benefit of bringing the impure winds into the central channel? Simply put, it purifies them. As we discussed in the previous chapters, by purifying the impure winds, strong emotions, conceptual thoughts, and neurotic tendencies diminish and the mind naturally becomes calm and even. This happens naturally, in part simply by sitting in the Seven-Point Posture, even if we don’t know any other aspect of wind energy training!

Because of this very important role of the posture, it is desirable that we make an effort to develop mindfulness about all of its seven aspects, and work diligently at sitting in this manner whenever we sit down to practice until it becomes a natural habit. We may find that simply learning to sit in this posture is its own form of mindfulness training.

Yoga of the Wind

Physical posture belongs to the category of *outer yoga*. The next type of yoga we are learning here, the yoga of the wind, is called *inner yoga*. *Inner* refers to the subtle or more profound nature of this yoga, as compared with the more general nature of outer yoga. The physical posture of the body enables the central channel to open and the wind energy to enter.

Each of the seven aspects of the physical outer yoga—the Seven-Point Posture of Vairocana—are linked to *the five root types* of wind energy. These are five main types of wind energy found in the body.

The Lower Winds. The wind energy that abides in the area above the genitals, the “secret area,” is called the lower winds, one of the five root wind energies. These winds perform the function of excretion. When we sit in the full lotus posture of outer yoga, the lower wind naturally enters the central channel. Sitting in Sattva posture supports this process as well.

The Winds in the Abdomen. Another of the five root wind energies, the winds that aid digestion are found in the lower abdomen. When we place vajra fists in the crease of the thighs, this naturally causes the belly to poke out. When the belly pokes out, this relaxes the wind that is abiding in the lower abdomen so that the digestive winds naturally enter the central channel.

Many people in the West have the habit of hunching over. The reason for this is that we are raised sitting in chairs or sofas, rather than sitting on the floor as is taught in many Asian cultures. When we sit, we often either bend over or lean back on

something. Slouching compacts the abdomen, which closes the belly, restricts breathing, and improperly curves the spine. This means that based on our habitual postures, the central channel remains closed.



Anyen Rinpoche demonstrates vajra fist: Place your thumb under your ring finger, and close your fist around it.



Sattva posture and placement of the back of the hands on the crease of the thigh. The placement of the vajra fists on the crease of the thigh, and the male sattva posture are demonstrated.



Seven Point Posture. The seven-point posture in full lotus—note the alignment of the spine, the set of the shoulders, the placement of the chin, and the direction of the gaze.



Inhalation/exhalation through the left nostril. Finger placement to close the right nostril for inhalation/exhalation through the left nostril.



Full lotus posture and beginning inhalation/exhalation through the right nostril.
Placement of the left finger on the left nostril for beginning inhalation/exhalation

The Life-Force Wind. In the heart center resides another of the root wind energies, the wind that “holds” the life force. The most important of all the wind energies and known as the root of all the winds, the life-force wind is what keeps us alive. Keeping the spine straight as an arrow enables the wind energy in the heart center to enter the central channel. This brings us to another instruction, which points out the necessity of keeping the spine straight like a hawk in its nest. Again, this metaphor may not feel accessible at first because we do not often see hawks in their nests. However, the meaning of the example is that hawks are very proud birds. When they sit in their nests, they raise their bodies up in a regal posture. We, too, should not only straighten the spine, but feel almost as though the head is being pulled up from above. This not only aids the wind energy in the heart center in entering the central channel, it also wakes us up and gives the mind a light, joyous feeling.

When we are mindful of our posture, focusing on the Seven-Point Posture of Vairocana, then the wind in the secret place above the genital area, the wind in the belly, and the wind in the heart center will naturally enter the central channel. With these details in mind, we can begin to appreciate the necessity of having a skillful teacher. If the wind energy does not properly enter the central channel, but instead comes up into the chest area and mixes with the wind abiding there, mental or physical illness can develop. This is actually the source of many illnesses, because, as a result of various conditions in the body and the environment, the winds that normally abide in different parts of the body become mixed in the heart center. In the previous few

chapters, we talked about heart-wind and how it can lead to cardiopulmonary disorders, as well as mental and emotional imbalance. Improperly working with wind energy can actually cause heart-wind. We must be careful to adhere to the beginning instructions in this book, and seek out a master of this tradition if we wish to work with wind energy training seriously.

The Upward-Moving Wind. Slightly tucking the chin toward the chest causes a natural downward bend in the neck. This aspect of the posture is related to the fourth of the root wind energies, the upward-moving wind, which naturally abides in the throat. Because of this detail of the posture, the upward-moving wind enters the central channel.

The All-Pervasive Wind Energy. The last of the root wind energies, the all-pervasive wind energy abides between the skin and the flesh, covering the entire body underneath the skin. Moving the shoulders back and wide like the wings of a vulture helps us sit completely motionless. Sitting motionless helps the all-pervasive wind energy enter the central channel. Also, when we tuck vajra fists into the creases of the thighs, it is easier to keep the spine straight and for the shoulders to naturally move back like the wings of a vulture, also causing the all-pervasive wind energy to move into the central channel.

Mastering the Winds. The sixth point is not related to any specific aspect of the posture or to one specific root wind energy. We have just learned that when we sit and incorporate the first five points of the Seven-Point Posture of Vairocana, the five root wind energies will enter the central channel. This is called *binding* or *mastering the wind*. When we bind the root winds, the 21,000 winds that give rise to the afflictive emotions naturally enter the central channel. Thus, this posture binds the winds of the afflictive emotions.

Seeing Nonconceptual Wisdom. The seventh point of this practice incorporates both the aspects of touching the tongue to the top of the mouth and that of eyes open and gazing along the top of the nose. When the tongue touches the top of the mouth, the jaw naturally drops down and creates space in the mouth. Through the lens of Tibetan Buddhism, this, combined with open eyes, enables us to see the nature of nonconceptual wisdom. When we meditate, it is essential that our eyes be open!

Precautions

The great master Milarepa said about physical discomfort, “I am happy to feel pain because I know I am exhausting my karma.” Each of us should work with some kind of physical yoga, which will enable the body, and especially the joints, to become more

flexible and the hips to open so that we can sit more properly in the Seven-Point Posture. We should try to counteract how spoiled our bodies may have become.

Ordinarily, we do not practice physical yoga, nor do we sit in the Seven-Point Posture. We are content to just let the body do whatever it wants to. When something hurts during our sitting practice, then we use a pillow, we change our posture, or we prop ourselves up. We must instead teach ourselves to sit in the Seven-Point Posture before we attempt wind energy training, otherwise, the five root wind energies will not enter the central channel, and we will not be able to bind the wind energy. If the five root wind energies do not enter the central channel, we cannot master the 21,000 winds of the afflictive emotions. Instead, afflictions will continue to arise in the same manner that they always have. We should anticipate and accept some physical discomfort as we work at sitting in this posture. Of course, we do not want to injure ourselves; we should work gradually and steadily at this practice. We may have physical limitations and need to sit in a chair when we practice. Even so, we will still receive benefit from physical movement and stretching.

Working with the Five Elements

We just learned about how, from the inner point of view, the five root winds will enter the central channel based on the Seven-Point Posture. When we sit in the Seven-Point Posture, *the five branch winds*, which are described as the winds of the five elements (earth, water, fire, wind, and space), will rest in their natural place in the body rather than being scattered here and there. We call this *binding the elements*, because the wind energy settles into its own place. The following part of the explanation is given from the secret point of view, meaning that these teachings are not given in depth to inexperienced practitioners, because they are more specific, more profound, and more subtle than the outer and the inner.

The Wind of Space. We have already talked about the straight spine being a very crucial part of the Seven-Point Posture. In addition to allowing the life-force wind to enter the central channel, we also said it gives the mind a joyous and awakened feeling. With regard to the five elements, this aspect of the posture binds the wind of the space element.

The Wind of Water. Touching the tongue to the roof of the mouth binds the wind of the water element.

The Wind of Wind. Setting the shoulders back in the manner of a vulture's wings binds the wind of the wind element.

The Wind of Earth. Placing the hands either in vajra fists or palms down on the

thighs binds the wind of the earth element.

The Wind of Fire. Slightly tucking the neck binds the wind of the fire element.

When we take the sum of all of these actions together, we bind the five root wind energies, and then the five branch or secondary wind energies related to the five elements based on our posture.

PRACTICING YOGA OF WIND AND MIND

As a general note, wind energy practice is best done early in the morning before we have eaten. Even if we do not practice in the early morning, we should allow our food to digest for an hour or two before we start to practice.

After practicing physical yoga for fifteen to twenty minutes, we sit down in the Seven-Point Posture. Before continuing, we should take a moment to notice our intention. Meditation should always begin with a compassionate wish to help all sentient beings, including ourselves. So if that wish is absent at first, we should cultivate it by thinking, “May the result of this practice be that I am able to love and support others selflessly.” In Mahayana Buddhism, we call this wish to benefit all beings everywhere “generating the mind of bodhichitta.” *Bodhichitta* is a Sanskrit word that means “enlightened mind.”

Now that we have engaged in some physical movement, cultivated our intention, and sat in the proper posture, we will engage in an exercise that helps us to dispel the karmic wind energy from the body. This breath work can be the gateway to our sitting practice. We can use it once daily or each time we sit down to practice. It is called the *Nine Cycles of Inhalation and Exhalation*.

The nine cycles are broken up into three groups of three breaths. The first six sets of inhalations and exhalations are done using alternating nostrils. The mouth remains closed the entire time and we breathe only through the nose. As a general note, the teachings on wind energy training and Yantra Yoga emphasize breathing through the nostrils during the entire practice session. Unless we are given specific, personal instruction by a master on how and when to breathe through the mouth, we should always breathe through the nose when we practice wind energy training.

Western medical researchers have found a variety of benefits that come from breathing through the nostrils rather than the mouth. First, breathing through the nostrils results in more oxygen being absorbed into the arteries. This occurs because nitric oxide is made by our nose and sinus membranes and carried into the lungs during

nostril breathing. Nitric oxide relaxes and widens the arteries, enabling them to absorb more oxygen. This gas, when inhaled even in small amounts into the lungs, can increase oxygen absorption significantly.¹ The air we inhale through our nose is also humidified and warmed, which allows for better oxygen–carbon dioxide exchange.²

Nostril breathing also increases the absorption of oxygen because of the resistance provided by the act of exhaling through the nasal passages. Since the air moves more slowly than it would if exhaled through the mouth, it spends more time in the lungs, and therefore more oxygen is absorbed. This resistance during the act of exhaling is exercise for the lungs, increasing their efficiency.

Finally, because nostril breathing prolongs exhalation, it stimulates the vagus nerve. Stimulating the vagus nerve results in lower blood pressure and heart rate, a lower breathing rate, and also decreases inflammation in the body.³

Exercise 2

THE NINE CYCLES OF INHALATION AND EXHALATION

Guided instruction: Begin by taking a soft inhale, pressing the left nostril closed with the left index finger, and exhaling through the right nostril. Next, inhale through the right nostril, and then switch sides: the left index finger releases the left nostril while the right index finger closes the right nostril. Then, exhale through the left nostril, inhale through the left nostril, and continue as before, alternating nostrils. Each inhalation/exhalation through a single nostril counts as one set. Thus, what was just described were two of the nine cycles or sets of breathing. We repeat this until we have inhaled and exhaled a total of six times—three through each nostril. Finally, we take three sets of inhalation and exhalation through both nostrils.

General notes. This is general advice for how the breathing should be done during this exercise. The exhalation is a little strong, but it should be long and relaxed. Continue exhaling until the breath completely dissolves, and then inhale again, also in a very elongated and relaxed manner. Always breathe as deeply as possible, pulling the breath down into the abdomen, and trying to feel it pervade the entire body. Since we are working with abdominal, and not thoracic, breathing, be sure that the chest and shoulders do not rise with the breath, and that only the belly expands.

Exercise 3

VISUALIZATION IN THE NINE CYCLES OF INHALATION AND EXHALATION

Nine-Cycle Breathing. The nine cycles of breathing can be complemented with a visualization practice. In the beginning, you may wish to just become comfortable with the actual breathing practice taught above.

Before starting, you can either visualize that in the space above your head there is pure, clean, unobstructed energy, or, if you are a practicing Buddhist, you can visualize an array of wisdom beings. Regardless of your level of experience or specific religious or spiritual beliefs, this simple visualization can be used by any practitioner.

To practice visualization, begin by inhaling softly and then making the first exhalation through the right nostril. Think of dispelling the afflicted mind of anger out with the breath. When exhaling through the right nostril, we send out masculine energy, ash-colored and in the form of snakes, which is symbolic of anger. We should also think to ourselves that we are sending out all impurity, obstacles, and sources of illnesses, especially cancer and illnesses related to the liver.

Next, inhaling through the right nostril, we take in either the pristine, pure energy visualized in the space above us or the blessings of the wisdom beings visualized above. Engaged focus and concentration are very important when working with visualization because they allow us to feel that we are actually being filled with pure energy and blessings. Next, we exhale through the left nostril, this time sending out feminine energy, the afflicted mind of desire. We see the breath as being red in color, in the form of roosters, which is symbolic of desire. We also think to ourselves that we are sending out obstacles and illnesses that are related to a lack of warmth in the body. These are illnesses that cause wounds and sores on the body, and also back and joint pain. We repeat this pattern of white/right and red/left as just described, for three sets of inhalation and exhalation from each nostril, for a total of six sets.

Finally, breathing through both nostrils, we receive pure energy and blessings, and then send the breath out through both nostrils, thinking we are sending out the afflicted mind of ignorance, the antithesis of wisdom. We see the breath like dark smoke in the shape of pigs, which are symbolic of ignorance. We think to ourselves that we are dispelling all illnesses in general that are related to imbalances in the wind energy. We also dispel all faults, nonvirtue, and obstacles, which have manifested as impure channels and wind in the body. We do this a total of three times, making a total of nine sets of inhalations and exhalations.

SUGGESTED DAILY PRACTICE FOR WIND ENERGY TRAINING: AN OVERVIEW

We have learned the Seven-Point Posture and the Nine-Cycle Breathing, so we are close to being ready for a complete wind energy practice session. A typical session is

structured like this: Begin with a short session of physical yoga. Practice for about fifteen to twenty minutes, or however long you wish. Then take your seat on a cushion. Take a moment to reflect on your motivation, making sure that the wish to practice for the benefit of all beings is present in the mind. Next, engage in the Nine-Cycles Breathing to dispel the karmic wind. This short sequence will prepare you for engaging in a short session of wind energy training, using one of the techniques introduced in the chapters that follow: reflecting on life's impermanence, training in mindfulness and coming back to the breath when the mind is distracted, and training in a compassionate and altruistic motivation.

The Tibetan Buddhist teachings say that whenever we sit on the cushion to practice, we sit in two kinds of solitude. First, the body is to be in solitude—meaning we should be in a relaxed environment without distractions. Second, the mind is in solitude—that is, quiet and focused. Be aware of this when you choose the time and place to develop your practice.

Meditating on Impermanence with Breath Awareness

MEDITATING ON IMPERMANENCE is an important part of wind energy training because it helps us to develop momentary awareness of the body and the breath, as well as to release stress, the basis of many mental and physical imbalances. When we emotionally understand that both we ourselves, our loved ones, all beings, and the entire world are impermanent, we feel more relaxed when unwanted and painful situations arise. In this chapter, we will learn what impermanence is according to the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, how to contemplate impermanence, and how to use that contemplation as the basis for wind energy training.

FIRST, CONTEMPLATE IMPERMANENCE INTELLECTUALLY

The general Buddhist teachings explain that the manifestation of all of phenomenal existence, including both beings and the outer environment, is possible because of a multitude of causes and conditions coming together at a certain point in time and space. This manifestation is happening on a moment-to-moment basis, again and again, and each moment is an expression of fresh causes and conditions coming together. This is called *the nature of impermanence*.

What are these causes and conditions? One way we can answer this question is that the five elements act as some of the causes and conditions that express as phenomenal existence. Based on how the elements come together, we perceive the appearance of phenomena in a certain way. For example, at any given point in time and space, the various elements either are in harmony, are increasing, or are decreasing. We can even understand our own lives in this way. The five elements come together to form a life in the mother's womb. Based on the increase of the elements we take birth, and continuing increase of the elements further expresses moment-by-moment as our growth and development as human beings. As we grow older, the elements begin to decay, and this expresses moment-by-moment as sickness and aging. Finally, as the elements dissolve and fall out of connection with one another, we experience the death of the physical body.

Another useful way to think about this idea is to reflect on the phrase "causes and

conditions.” Because both of these words, *causes* and *conditions*, are described in the plural, we can be sure that the manifestation of each and every phenomenon is made of a multitude of things coming together to express as that one particular appearance, in that one particular moment in time. In other words, there is no single cause for anything. There are always various energies, influences, and karma at work.

Why does it matter that the phenomenal world manifests based on causes and conditions? It matters because this is the logical proof of the nature of impermanence. Anything that is made up of causes and conditions can also be broken down into its constituent parts. At some point, all things that come together will separate. That is why we say that whatever is impermanent is, by definition, changeable and destructible.

When we think about the outer world around us, it can take a very long time to see the changeable nature of phenomena. But if we wait long enough, it is impossible for us to find anything lasting and permanent. If we reflect on the way that the world has evolved from eons ago until now, based on the increase and the decrease of the elements, even vast phenomena such as the ocean have gone through great metamorphoses. The Himalayas, which are now the highest mountains on the planet and still growing to this day, were once completely under water. Around 250 million years ago, during the Mesozoic era, the Tibetan plateau was covered by the Tethys Ocean. Today, fossils of underwater sea life can be found high on snowy mountain peaks. The Great Salt Lake in Utah is an inland saltwater sea in transition. It once covered over 22,000 square miles—most of Utah and portions of Nevada and Idaho. About sixteen thousand years ago, it began drying up and is now just a large saltwater lake flat. Contemplating examples such as these, which seem permanent and lasting in our minds, helps us to gain intellectual insight into the fact that there is absolutely nothing in this world that is lasting or unchanging.

NEXT, UNDERSTAND IMPERMANENCE EMOTIONALLY

Impermanence is something that every human being needs to know intimately. If we understand impermanence first intellectually and then emotionally, through and through, then all of the comforts of life—the wealth that we cherish so much, our family, friends, and loved ones, and even the difficult or painful connections we have with others, become less important and less weighty in the mind. When we understand that even these things are impermanent, our unhappiness and mental suffering lessen. Ideally speaking, our general outlook and feelings toward everything and everyone become less intense and more balanced as a result of understanding impermanence.

For those of us who have never reflected on impermanence before, we may grasp

onto our own version of reality so tightly that thinking about impermanence can seem painful or depressing. We are not wrong for thinking so. However, when we try to avoid the truth of impermanence by pushing it away or ignoring it, we are just throwing ourselves deeper into the same denial that we always find ourselves in. Actually, the suffering of denial is even worse than ordinary suffering. Denial implies that there is some awareness that we are trying to reject. We know something but refuse to see the truth. After an unwanted situation occurs and we experience the suffering that we knew was bound to come sooner or later, we experience suffering heaped upon suffering—first the suffering of the experience itself, and then the suffering of knowing that we could have done something to emotionally and spiritually prepare ourselves but did not.

Understanding Impermanence Is the Basis for Spiritual Practice

In the Buddhist teachings, the nature of impermanence is taught to each and every practitioner. It is the basis for all other practice yet to come on the path. It is a basic attitude, an outlook that the mind has adopted in order to maintain the inspiration to practice. Without the knowledge that phenomena are impermanent, we have no reason to make a spiritual journey at all. We might as well simply hope that things in our lives will go in a happy manner, or fool ourselves into thinking that it is possible for life to be full of happiness, with no ups and downs. Once we realize that happiness is not a state that can ever be permanently achieved, and that it is impossible to avoid sorrow and unhappiness, we feel much more committed to taking care of our spiritual lives and making some effort at a spiritual practice.

In the beginning, impermanence is always taught as an intellectual reflection. We need to understand it logically. We need the mind to be completely certain that there is no avoiding change. Becoming completely convinced of the truth of this statement is the key to spiritual practice. At times, especially when times are tough, we glimpse the changeable nature of life. We think back to happier times with longing, wondering what went wrong. The truth is, nothing went wrong. It is simply impossible for life to continue on in the same manner without end. However, when things are going well, thoughts of life's impermanence do not even enter the mind. We want so much to believe that happiness will continue on forever. When we reflect on impermanence, we must use our intellect to teach ourselves the truth of impermanence—with the knowledge that the mind is always easier to convince than the heart. However, it is based on the truth of impermanence penetrating our heart and mind that we will be able to carry the knowledge of impermanence into our everyday life. This knowledge must become second nature.

Exercise 4

MEDITATING ON THE IMPERMANENCE OF OUR OWN LIVES

After we are deeply certain about the all-pervasive nature of impermanence, then we can start to meditate on it and use it as a method for wind energy training. Before we begin contemplating impermanence, we will have already done a short session of yoga, perfected our posture, generated a positive motivation, and practiced the Nine-Cycle Breathing, as taught in chapter 4. Then, we can start with the following simple contemplation: “Because all phenomena are impermanent, I know that my own very life, my very own body that I cherish so much, is impermanent.” The Buddhist teachings describe the body as a guesthouse and the mind or consciousness as a guest. Taking this metaphor as a starting point, we can then combine our contemplation of impermanence with wind energy training by working with inhalation and exhalation as we reflect on our own personal impermanence.

Beginning with the exhalation, as we send the breath out, we should think to ourselves, “This very life is impermanent. I may not have the opportunity to take my next breath.” As we think this, we should actually feel a lack of confidence about the continuation of the next moment of our lives. There is nothing to assure us that we will actually be alive another moment to take another breath. Call to mind all of the causes and conditions that could have led to death in this very moment: an aneurism, a heart attack, a stray bullet, a car accident, a kitchen fire, a building collapsing, or simply not waking from a dreamless sleep. We should one-pointedly focus on this feeling of certainty in the impermanence of life.

Next, as we inhale, we should think to ourselves, “It is because of good karma accumulated in the past”—or if you do not believe in the idea of karma—“Because of supportive conditions in the world around me, I have had the good fortune to take this breath. Who knows if those conditions are going to continue in the future; who knows if those good conditions will sustain my life even another moment?”

This contemplative meditation can easily be incorporated with wind energy training. The best way to use this technique is to reflect on impermanence while directly working with the breath—using each exhalation and inhalation as a point to refresh and deepen our knowledge and understanding of impermanence.

If we are not comfortable working with a contemplative practice in conjunction with breath work, we can change the practice slightly. We start out by reflecting on impermanence. At the moment that we really feel convinced of life’s impermanence—we really feel the groundlessness of this world, the environment, and our entire being

—fear or doubt may arise. We may think, “What will I do! How will I exist in a world that is completely unpredictable and uncertain!” At that moment, we can come back to the breath. We can just notice and follow the inhalation and exhalation one-pointedly. While we do this, we should not let the mind become distracted by any fear, doubt, or strong feelings. Instead, we should keep focusing one-pointedly on the breath until all of these doubts and fears completely dissolve.

As we are working with wind energy training, we sometimes need to change the focus of our practice. If we work with the breath for a long time, the mind can become tired of this singular focus and become distracted. At the moment that we notice that we are no longer able to maintain concentration on the breath, we should go back to a contemplative reflection on impermanence. Another thing that might happen is that, as a result of focusing so much on the breath, the breath itself becomes unnatural. This happens simply because we are paying so much attention to it. We find that we are unable to breathe in a relaxed and ordinary way. Then, too, we should begin to reflect on impermanence in a more contemplative way.

Exercise 5

ALL OF LIFE IS LIKE A DREAM

The impermanent nature of phenomena is not difficult to understand; it is something that every single person knows. But to actually feel that all of existence and even our very life and the people that we love are impermanent is on a completely different scale. We can reflect on this using the metaphor that all of life is like a dream. As we go back to our contemplative practice, think, “Not only myself, my own physical body, but those I love, all people I am connected to, and the entire phenomenal world including oceans and mountains, all of it is just like a dream.”

Dreams are the perfect analogue to what we are talking about, because everybody knows dreams are not real. Nobody expects a dream to have come true when they wake up. And none of us would try to convince someone else that what we saw in a dream was reality. Our personal feeling of certainty in the impermanent nature of all phenomena should rise to the level of certainty we have that dreams are not reality.

As you contemplate impermanence, see in your mind’s eye, that everything happening around you is just like a dream, even though it is ordinarily taken to be real. This is what it means to truly meditate on impermanence.

Another unique quality of a dream is that even though it has no real or lasting quality, as we are experiencing it, it seems completely real. It is only when we wake up that we realize that the experience that seemed completely real, that completely

engulfed the senses, wasn't true at all.

Thinking about the fact that our own lives are like a dream is not an easy thing to do. We grasp our lives as though they are real at each and every moment. We constantly grasp at phenomena and beings that are impermanent as being permanent and lasting and real. And this causes us great mental, physical, and emotional suffering. One of the strongest forms of suffering that we experience is a result of feelings of strong emotional attachment to our family and close friends. When change comes, we often become emotionally upset and unable to cope with the experience. However, our suffering is not limited to just emotional suffering. Sometimes the shock to the system even has physical symptoms, such as fatigue, headaches, or loss of appetite, which can lead to illness. Our grasp on phenomena and beings, which are actually impermanent, as permanent is so strong that it affects our emotional, mental, and physical health. If we could have known with certainty in the very beginning that those relationships and beings could not continue in the same manner, our suffering would not be nearly so intense.

The same is true not only of people but also of experiences we dislike or wish to avoid. When we have mental apprehension, anger, resentment, or dislike, this also brings suffering to body and mind. At times, when there is a situation coming that we particularly want to avoid, we may not only create intense mental and emotional suffering, we can also become physically ill as a result of our wish to avoid the experience.

These symptoms of mental, emotional, and physical imbalances are physiologically related to our inability to breathe properly, and are mentally and emotionally related to our grasping at impermanent phenomena as permanent. Remember: our lives are like a TV drama. Sometimes things look good, sometimes they look bad. Sometimes they are happy and we wish things would go on forever, and then suddenly something happens—things fall apart. Life seems unbearable and painful. This is merely the impermanent nature of life. There is no controlling any of it. There is no controlling our physical body; there is no controlling the process of aging; there is no controlling the environment around us, the state of the world, the government, or the nature of politics. The only thing that we can control and master is our own spiritual path.

After reflecting on how all of life is impermanent, go back to the focus on the inhalation and the exhalation of the breath.

Exercise 6

THE NATURE OF LIFE IS LIKE A WATERFALL

Another contemplation that we can work with is the metaphor of water falling from a high cliff. Think to yourself, “My life, all of the conditions, environment, and people around me are like water falling from a high cliff. A waterfall only moves. It is never still. It cannot be caught or frozen in time.” Even though we may wish that time would stop for a moment, that we could freeze a frame of that waterfall and suspend the water in thin air, the moments of our lives are like that water falling. They can never be stopped. Whether it is a certain period of time when we feel mentally and emotionally happy and stable, when there seems to be harmony with our family and friends, or our life just seems to be particularly easy and full, none of it can remain. Like water falling, it will certainly change.

When suffering comes, such as experiencing the pain of an illness or being plagued by financial problems, also remember that this situation will pass. Just like that waterfall in constant motion, the experience of trouble and suffering we are having right now will certainly change.

After reflecting on how life is like a waterfall in constant movement, go back to the focus on the inhalation and the exhalation of the breath.

Exercise 7

LIFE IS LIKE THE BLOWING WIND

The Tibetan masters of old gave many traditional ways to reflect on life’s impermanent nature. Another metaphor that can be particularly vivid is the metaphor that life is as impermanent as the blowing wind. Wind is always in motion. It can never be caught in time; it is the natural and elusive movement of air. We may think about our own life and wish that it was longer, but this is impossible. Just as what we mean when we think of “wind” implicitly contains the idea of movement, so what we mean by “life” actually contains the reality of death. Think to yourself, “Neither my life nor anything in my life can be prolonged. All of it will move and change just like the blowing wind.” Try to feel with certainty that although the physical body, as well as relationships, situations, and the environment appear to be stable and motionless, they will certainly transform, decay, and change.

After reflecting on how life is like the wind, go back to focusing on the inhalation and the exhalation of the breath.

Exercise 8

LIFE IS LIKE A BUBBLE

This metaphor speaks not only to the impermanent nature of life but also to our mind's insatiable creativity. Each of us is living in a bubble of our own making. Simply put, we see what we want to see. Even when we see the nature of impermanence in our lives, we ignore it, pretend it is not there, and wish it away.

Think to yourself, "My mind constantly superimposes my own ideas onto everything. Even though things around me are constantly in a state of flux, I see them as being in a state of constancy. Even though phenomena have no true and lasting essence, my mind sees them as having a real and lasting nature. Even though I know that all things will change, I believe that my life and my physical body are the exception."

The image of a bubble bursting also fits with our experience of life. We have no idea what will cause the bubble to burst, so to speak. We only know that when it does, it can feel like our lives are in ruins. If we had known in the beginning that what we see is a bubble of our own making, and that it cannot be trusted or depended on, the suffering we experience in the wake of its destruction would be so much less.

After reflecting on how the nature of life is like a bubble, return to focusing on the inhalation and exhalation of the breath.

Exercise 9

LIFE IS LIKE A MAGICIAN'S TRICK

As children, we sit before a magician and are thrilled by his tricks. We believe, in part because we want to, that there is no actual trick but that we have witnessed a miracle, something truly magical. As we grow older, we become suspicious of this so-called magician. We buy a book where we can read exactly how the trick was done, step by step. We feel disappointed in not being able to believe in that magic trick—or the magician—any longer.

Life is like a magician's trick. At first glance, things seem beautiful, even perfect. But as time goes on, we become suspicious of our own illusions; of our belief that things will go according to our wishes; and that change will not interrupt our well-laid plans. Think to yourself, "For so long, I have believed in the magician's illusion of permanence. I want to wake up from this illusion and see my life and the world for what it is: the nature of constant change."

After reflecting on how life is like a magician's trick, return to the inhalation and exhalation of the breath.

Exercise 10

An evening primrose is a flower that only blooms early in the morning, then wilts in the heat of the sun. Each and every one of us is like an evening primrose. We have good, supportive conditions to sustain life for a time. But when the time comes for us to die, no one can stop it.

Think to yourself, “Wherever there is fullness, decline and decay must come.” We put so much of our energy into avoiding and fending off the process of aging. Yet, like the evening primrose that only likes the early-morning light, even our own lives and our own bodies will wilt in time. Remind yourself that if one moment is happy, sorrow or sadness may come in the next. Once things have gathered together, it is certain that sooner or later, they must part. It is only a matter of time.

After reflecting on how life is like an evening primrose, return to the inhalation and exhalation of the breath.

General Advice on Contemplating Impermanence

Developing a contemplative practice is a process. No one can tell you how long your practice session should be. It is best to choose an amount of time that seems manageable and that you can keep to on a daily basis without feeling like it is too much. If you choose an amount of time that is too long, you will become discouraged and quit. Instead, you can start with fifteen or twenty minutes, and increase the length of your sitting practice over time. Of course, if you wish for particular guidance in how to develop a practice that is more specific than what is presented in this book, you should seek a teacher who can give you more personal advice.

As you read through these suggested contemplations, some will seem more vivid and evocative to you than others. Start with those. Over time, you may want to use the other contemplations as a way to deepen your practice and reflect on impermanence in a new way. In one practice session, you can work with either one or several of these metaphors to help you contemplate the nature of impermanence. It is up to you to use whatever seems to be most helpful.

You may also want to start keeping a journal where you note down other evocative and personal examples of metaphors, or objects of contemplation that you notice in your own life. In doing so, you make impermanence practice even more personal and applicable to yourself.

Exercise 11

CELEBRATE LIFE

Now that you have taken some time to contemplate the impermanence of life, you should be overjoyed that you have this opportunity to value and use each and every moment for your own good and the good of others. How wonderful!

At the end of the wind energy training session, spend a few moments using the breath to channel this attitude of rejoicing. As you inhale, you can think, “How fortunate! My life lasted long enough to take this breath.” As you exhale, you can think, “May I use the remainder of my life wisely.” You may also want to apply this thinking as you fall asleep at night, rejoicing that you lived another day before you fall asleep, and as you awaken in the morning, aspiring to use what time you have left wisely.

Unlocking Old Patterns through Wind Energy Training

BECOMING AWARE of our own emotional tendencies is an important part of wind energy training because through this awareness, we notice the connection between our state of mind, how we feel, and the breath. This, in turn, helps us to break old habits and patterns, and develop new responses to inner and outer stimuli. These stimuli are constantly surfacing—and so is the breath. As a result, it is no coincidence that the breath is the perfect tool to use on a moment-to-moment basis. Whether we are eating, sleeping, sitting, working, engaging with others, or driving, we can cultivate awareness of the breath throughout them all. In this chapter, we will explore the emotional tendencies that tend to dominate our minds, and how to release that emotion or train in a new response through wind energy training.

HOW DO WE REACT?

Each one of us has developed unhealthy habits and patterns over the course of our lifetimes. In saying this, we do not mean to denigrate or judge ourselves, implying “That part of me is good, and that part is bad.” We do not help ourselves by feeling inferior, inadequate, or incapable. We are who we are, and that is what we have to work with.

At the same time, there is no use denying our imperfections. All of us act in ways that we know are not healthy. We make choices, conscious or subconscious, to do things that are not in our best interest. At times, we even see ourselves acting out these patterns of unhealthy behavior, yet we are unable to stop ourselves from doing the very thing we know we should avoid. We do not need to have an addiction to have an unhealthy behavior that seems to perpetually fuel itself. Being imperfect is simply part of being human.

Reflecting on these most difficult aspects of our personalities, we should not give up hope. None of us is trapped into being someone we do not want to be. Our lives are totally new and fresh in the moment. Even more importantly, now we are learning about wind energy training. We are learning to be more flexible by working with the energy that lies underneath old patterns of unhealthy behavior. And, as we already

know, life is impermanent and change is imminent! Where we want to go is up to us.

Seeing Our Own Habitual Tendencies

In the Buddhist teachings, we describe every pattern of behavior as a “habitual tendency.” There is no judgment in the use of this term. We may have habitual tendencies toward healthy behavior as well as toward harmful or unhealthy behavior. From the point of view of the Buddhist teachings, all sentient beings have developed their own individual habits, both positive and negative, over time. If we accept the idea of past lives and karma, it makes sense to say that based on the strength of the karma and habits we developed in past lives, certain habits and emotional tendencies have been carried into this lifetime. Even if we do not accept the idea of past lives, it still makes sense to think that during this lifetime, we have developed our own distinct ways of relating to others and the world around us. Each of us reacts strongly to certain things and passively to others. Our reactions have to do with our habitual outlook, the lens through which we perceive the world.

According to the Buddhist teachings, the five poisons are the basis for all of our emotional responses. Of course, all types of emotional responses can develop based on our basic disposition and our life experiences. Our habitual tendencies are expressed through body, speech, and mind. However, as we reflect on these patterns in the context of wind energy training, we will start to see our personal tendencies as the food for wind energy practice. Our emotional tendencies are the most powerful energies we have to work with, because they color everything we do, say, and think. If we can start to work directly with our emotional habits and reactions, we can make real and lasting changes in our own lives and behavior by developing more emotional stability, kindness, flexibility, and appreciation.

Purifying Our Deepest Habits

We now know that our emotional tendencies are an expression of the wind energy in our bodies at any given moment. And we all bear witness to the habits and cycles of our emotional lives. Taking this understanding to a deeper level, we can see that our wind energy must be a mirror image of these habits and cycles. Otherwise, it would not be possible for these habitual emotional reactions to rise up upon the wind energy. So we are not only working on making behavioral changes on the surface, we are working to purify the habits and impurities in the energy that fuels these patterns.

Exercise 12

RECOGNIZING OUR DOMINANT EMOTIONAL TENDENCIES

To practice the style of wind energy training presented in this chapter, first establish a focus for the practice. The focus will be your dominant emotional tendency or mindset. In other words, how do you tend to react emotionally? What emotional tendency would you most like to alleviate? You probably have some idea of the answer to this question because whatever you react to the most probably causes you the most mental and emotional suffering. What kind of emotional reactions cause you the most pain? For example, you might think, “If I didn’t get so angry so often, I’d feel so much better.”

Each of us has a sense of our own temperament; however, we often see ourselves differently than others see us. We sometimes lack insight into ourselves. For example, we might not think of ourselves as a particularly impatient person. However, this perception might not be shared by others whom we interact with on a daily basis. Because we may lack insight into ourselves, we should take time to reflect on and take stock of our dominant emotional habits so we can get a more accurate “self-portrait” before starting these practices.

One way to do this is by talking with a spouse or trusted friend whom you can count on to give you honest and compassionate feedback. You might ask them how they perceive you, or how they characterize you in their own mind. Of course, they will likely offer some positive feedback, but they will probably also share some insight into your vulnerabilities or emotional tendencies.

If this approach is not suitable, another way to gain some insight is to carry a notebook with you during the day. When you notice that you are frustrated or emotionally upset, you can make a note about how you see yourself reacting to emotional triggers. Later, as these notes and personal reflections accumulate, you can see the common denominators. It might be helpful to keep in mind that several emotional tendencies can play off of one another—maybe you do not just have one!

There are several dominant emotional patterns that might be at work in your mind. Do you notice any of the following patterns in your daily life?

- Some of us are extremely hot-tempered. We become easily angered, impatient, or frustrated.
- Some of us are extremely emotionally attached to our friends and loved ones, and have difficulty doing things or making decisions on our own.

- Some of us have an extremely strong craving for creature comforts. We might spend all of our resources, both time and money, making ourselves and our environment beautiful.
- Some of us are greedy, even at the expense of our own health. We deny ourselves health care, healthy food, and other necessities because they cost money. We might have a poverty mind-set, never feeling that we have enough. We could be so tight with our money that we refuse to spend it, and instead hoard it in the bank, for no other purpose than as savings.
- Some of us are extremely neurotic. Our mind has the quality of being a “fire starter.” We make something happen through the sheer power of our suspicions and doubts by finding, and making, trouble even where there is none.
- Some of us have the tendency to be jealous. We create disharmony because we feel excluded or not good enough, and have difficulty connecting with others. We can never quite get comfortable with ourselves.
- Some of us are extremely arrogant. We need to be the center of attention and we crave praise and the adoration of others.

After we have recognized our strongest emotional tendency and established a focus, we use that emotion as the basis for wind energy practice. The practice has two components: a formal sitting practice and an integrated daily-life practice. Each of these aspects will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

The formal sitting practice can become the main part of our daily wind energy training. The integrated daily practice of wind energy training can be applied on the spot, whenever we see a particular emotional tendency rise up during the day.

MINDFULNESS AS A BASIS FOR WIND ENERGY TRAINING

Mindfulness is the link between wind energy training and our emotional responses. How does mindfulness enable us to not chase after unhealthy habitual responses and emotional tendencies? To understand this, take a moment to understand how mindfulness works.

In the English language, *mindfulness* is a single word, which many of us have come to understand as meaning “being extremely aware.” In the Tibetan language, *mindfulness*, or *dren she* (Tib. dran shes), is a compound word with two aspects. The first aspect of the word, *dren*, can be translated as “remembering,” and is the aspect of our mind that remembers to practice. The second aspect of the word, *she*, means “introspection.” In the mind, introspection is like a gatekeeper or a shepherd who is

constantly watching what is going on around us, what influences are coming into the mind, and what the mind is reacting to. So, reflecting on the Tibetan etymology, when we have true mindfulness, we first notice that the mind has been snagged by something, and then we remember to practice.

Working directly with our emotional tendencies and reactions requires strong mindfulness. Without strong mindfulness, we will not notice when an emotion has arisen in the mind, and we will not realize that we need to apply wind energy training.

How Attachments Form

To introduce how to practice mindfulness as a basis for wind energy training, let's use the example of the strong emotional tendency of desire. The emotional tendency of desire can manifest in all sorts of ways, such as wanting or seeking material, emotional, or sexual comforts. We might not think of comfort as being an expression of desire. We could use the word *attachment* instead of *comfort*. We express the emotional tendency of desire when we want to possess something or someone, want to maintain a certain experience, or wish to possess someone or something in the future.

Desire is generally an emotion based on the appearance of some kind of form perceived by the eyes. Some forms are extremely pleasing to look at; they almost seem magnetic. We want them as soon as we see them. We feel an emotional attachment to them. Yet we could have other reactions to the perception of form as well. Some forms make us angry, unhappy, or cause us to feel strong dislike. Some forms are completely neutral; we do not even notice them.

We accumulate karma, strengthen our existing emotional patterns, and even create new patterns and habits from our reactions to the forms we see. Another way of saying this is that we accumulate karma and strengthen our emotional tendencies based on chasing after, and wanting to possess, certain perceptions and experiences. For example, if we are caught up in the whirlwind of romantic intrigue, such as at the beginning of a relationship, we are overwhelmed by the intensity of our attachment when we see our beloved. Chasing after that intense feeling and enjoying the energetic charge of that emotion strengthens the emotional tendency of desire.

But desire is not limited to the people we love. We can desire anything the mind is attached to. For example, we might gasp in amazement and awe when we see a beautiful mansion, an expensive and elegant automobile, incredible artwork, or gardens full of flowers. Attachment arises toward anything we find aesthetically pleasing, if we crave it or wish to possess it. The difficulty is not with the beautiful appearance itself. The difficulty is with the mind's craving for more. A realized yogi sees the same beautiful appearances without that craving.

When we crave and chase after the forms and sensory experiences that the mind desires, we reinforce the habit of attachment. The more we reinforce the habit of desiring, the more we desire. Without mindfulness, which gives us the ability to break the cycle, we are sure to experience suffering based on these attachments. Ordinary attachment lacks the emotional understanding that our loved ones and the things we love are impermanent, and cannot be kept or maintained. Without this emotional certainty that all of life is impermanent, we are sure to suffer.

Exercise 13

BASIC MINDFULNESS TECHNIQUE

When we have mindfulness and introspection, it's very easy to apply wind energy training to any scenario we can think of, whether it be pleasant, unpleasant, painful, or distracting. It does not matter if the situation is currently happening, or is something that appears in the mind as a memory or thought that we can't seem to put down. Even during our sitting practice, the mind is barraged with memories of the past, sensations of the present, and thoughts of the future. Our thoughts and emotions are fueled by our wind energy—the “mount” that keeps the mind in perpetual motion—rather than being a direct result of outer circumstances. If this were not the case, the mind would be calmed simply by being in a quiet room with no distractions. Remember, the outer is a reflection of the inner.

We can use mindfulness at any time to help us calm the wind-mind, whether sitting on the cushion or walking about in our daily life. It can provide us with great emotional support if we cultivate it properly. To understand how mindfulness and wind energy training break the cycle of unhealthy emotional responses, let's use the example of a thought or scenario that causes anger to rise up on the wind energy.

First, we actually see, or the mind suddenly remembers or imagines, something that upsets us. Suppose we have worked incredibly hard planning and cooking a special dinner for our beloved. As we begin to share it with them, they push aside the plate saying they do not really like what we've prepared and that they would rather order in. The moment that the mind “sees” the scenario unfold, we react with anger and disappointment. Unbelievable! We have worked so hard, and they don't even appreciate all of the effort we made. Based on that reaction, we accumulate negative karma and strengthen the tendency for the mind to express anger.

However, if in the first moment that the mind sees our beloved not appreciating us, introspection causes us to think, “This makes me feel angry,” and then in the second moment, we remember to focus on the inhalation and exhalation of the breath, we

avoid accumulating karma and strengthening that tendency of anger in the mind. The moment we remember to focus on the breath and elongate our inhalation and exhalation, our respiratory rate and the buildup of wind energy in the chest begins to decrease, as does the physical feeling of anger. Here too, wind interacts with how we feel. So, by working with mindfulness, we are actually preventing the accumulation of karma.

Mindfulness practice gives us the choice to take proper and wise action. After focusing on the breath and gaining mental and emotional space, we have new choices available to us. We are able to think clearly and make the best decisions about how to act and what to say, or to evaluate if an action is wise and appropriate in the particular circumstances. We lose the tendency of bouncing around from one thing to the next based on our impulses and reactions.

Working with wind energy training in conjunction with any emotional reaction makes us feel more relaxed. When we relax, our mental and emotional peace of mind grows. How does it feel to be able to let go of something instead of letting it run around and around through the mind, getting stronger and stronger? This feeling is the true result of practicing meditation and working with wind energy.

Exercise 14

SITTING ON THE CUSHION TO TRAIN IN MINDFULNESS AND WIND ENERGY

We are now aware of our dominant emotional tendency, and we understand how to apply mindfulness and introspection to any situation, whether we are acting in the moment or recalling past moments. When we sit down to work with mindfulness and wind energy as a formal practice, we need to focus on our most dominant emotional reaction first. What would that look like?

As taught in chapter 4, whenever we prepare to do wind energy training as a formal practice, we first do a short period of yoga practice, work with the posture, develop a compassionate motivation, and engage in the Nine-Cycle Breathing.

Next, we bring to mind the focus of our practice. We think, “As I am working with inhalation and exhalation of the breath, I’m going to abandon the strong habit I have toward emotional attachment (or whatever emotional tendency has been chosen). I am going to notice when I am tempted to chase after that feeling, and instead let it remain in its own place by focusing one-pointedly on the breath.” This focused motivation helps us develop another good quality: strength of mind and the determination to engage in meaningful spiritual practice.

Then we should begin focusing on the inhalation and exhalation of the breath for as long as we are able without distraction, making our breath even and elongated. We can return to this strong determination to avoid a particular habitual tendency repeatedly during our practice session. If we sit for any period of time, we will probably notice our primary emotional tendency showing its face in our thoughts and daydreams while we sit. Notice when the mind becomes overpowered by that tendency using introspection, and then remember the strong motivation to abandon the habit. After we again vow to cut through this habit, we should return to focusing one-pointedly on the breath.

Mindfulness and the Five Poisons

We can work with mindfulness and wind energy training in conjunction with any of the five poisons. Some of them we have already talked about: desire (emotional attachment); anger (dislike, resentment, or impatience); or a neutral reaction that is generally classified as ignorance. The other two poisons are pride and jealousy.

The pride that is considered a poison is not the pride that is similar to rejoicing, where we feel good about things. It is an arrogance, the feeling that others are less than us. A reaction based on pride is, for example, when we see somebody on the street and think, “I am more attractive than that person,” or “I am smarter or more knowledgeable than that person.”

Jealousy stems from the feeling that we have less than others have. We think, “Why don’t I have what that person has?” and “Why is their life so much easier than mine?”

No matter what emotion comes up, we can rely on mindfulness and a one-pointed focus on the breath to break the habitual cycle of energy that fuels that emotion. This basic technique is so simple, so beneficial, and so powerful, whether we are doing it as a sitting practice and reflecting back on certain situations or doing it in the moment.

Exercise 15

USING WIND ENERGY TRAINING WITH EVERYDAY ANGER

Anger, distaste, dislike, or resentment—any way we want to characterize it—is something that we all struggle with. It is said in the Buddhist teachings that the negative karma accumulated based on anger is stronger than any other karma accumulated. The general Buddhist teachings say that patience is the antidote to anger. We can use the one-pointed focus on the inhalation and exhalation of the breath that we have learned to help us practice patience.

One specific example of everyday anger that most of us can relate to: You are driving on the highway, and somebody cuts you off. As soon as that person cuts you off, you honk the horn and shout at that person. You immediately feel angry, as if that person has done something to wrong you personally.

If we practice mindfulness and introspection and wind energy training in that moment, as soon as that person cuts us off, we think, “What a jerk! What’s he doing?” Then, in the next moment, we think, “I should start working with the breath rather than reacting in anger toward that person.” We immediately take up wind energy training, one-pointedly focusing on elongating the inhalation and exhalation of the breath and breathing deeply into the abdomen. As a result, the mind focuses, our respiratory rate decreases, and we begin to relax.

Exercise 16

TRAINING IN REJOICING

How else can we transform the mind’s emotional reactions? As we did with meditation on impermanence, we can again work with the practice of rejoicing. Because this practice works hand in hand with mindfulness practice, it can also be used both when we are on the cushion and in our daily life. We can just as easily practice rejoicing based on a recalled, imagined, or projected thought or idea as we can in an actual situation in our daily life.

For example, when we drive by a beautiful mansion with beautiful gardens—or in the case of sitting practice, recall or imagine a similar situation—our normal reaction might be one of jealousy, “Why does he or she deserve this house instead of me?” Or, we might judge the owner of such beautiful grounds, thinking that the beautiful house is evidence of the owner being flawed in some way—such as being greedy or having taken advantage of someone. Because our tendency toward jealousy is so strong, oftentimes we judge people when they have good things. We do not feel happy for them and for what they have to enjoy.

We can apply mindfulness and wind energy training by noticing our jealous reaction, focusing one-pointedly on the breath, and then cultivating a response of rejoicing: “How wonderful! The owner of that house is able to enjoy such a beautiful living space; they have beautiful gardens to uplift their spirit. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if all living beings had a beautiful living space and gardens to enjoy!” In that moment, we can also one-pointedly pray for each living being to have complete abundance, and send out that wish with the breath.

We can also practice rejoicing while working directly with the inhalation and

exhalation of the breath. We do not even have to directly see anything. We can also simply mentally imagine whatever delights we wish to offer to others. To do this, we simply breathe in deeply, and then as we send the breath out, think, “May each and every sentient being enjoy perfect abundance, such as what I see before me!”

Exercise 17

THE FIVE SENSES AND WIND ENERGY

Until now, we have been talking about our emotional tendencies in connection with the sense of sight. However, we react emotionally in the same way to the perceptions of our other senses. As with the other practices in this chapter, all five senses can be incorporated into both our sitting practice and during ordinary daily life, since our sensory perceptions do not stop simply because we sit down to meditate.

Sound perceived by the ear. Some sounds are beautiful and melodious, some are loud and harsh, and some sounds are neutral. We could rejoice in a beautiful sound, thinking, “How beautiful that sounds! May all other beings hear a sound as beautiful.” If the sound agitates us, or is overwhelmingly loud or piercing, we can immediately notice that and turn one-pointedly to the inhalation and exhalation of the breath. This is an example of working with sound as an expression of wind energy training.

Smells perceived by the nose. Some smells are delicious and fragrant, some are putrid and rotting, and some are neutral. As with sound, we can either notice the reaction in the mind and rejoice in that experience as soon as we smell something, or we can simply abide one-pointedly by focusing on the inhalation and exhalation of the breath.

Tastes perceived by the tongue. We have strong attachment to delicious tastes, such as honey or brown sugar. Once we take a taste, we want it to last and last. Some tastes we dislike because they are sour or bitter. And then there are neutral tastes. As you eat a meal, notice your reactions to the foods you taste. As with sound and smell, we can either notice the reaction in the mind and rejoice in that experience as soon as we taste something, or we can simply abide one-pointedly by focusing on the inhalation and exhalation of the breath.

Touch perceived by the skin. We can work with touch and wind energy training in just the same manner as we do with the other senses. Go to a clothing store and touch silks and soft fabrics. Touch puppies, flower petals, sandpaper, and salt crystals. Notice your reaction to these different textures—which are pleasant and which are uncomfortable? Then simply focus on the inhalation and exhalation of the breath.

CREATING NEW HABITS

Meditation is a process of habituation. In the Tibetan language, the words *meditation*, or *gom* (Tib. *sgom*), and *habituation*, also *gom* (Tib. *goms*) are from the same root and have a similar spelling. This shows the deep connection between the two words.

The purpose of all wind energy training is letting go of old habits and patterns. But we are not only letting go of the old. We are also developing new habits with healthier outcomes as we practice meditation. The mind is not going to be without habitual ways to cope and deal with the situations that come up in our lives. These new habits are not easy to develop. It took a lifetime to develop all the habits that we have right now! When we are working with the reactions in our own minds and applying wind energy training, we should not imagine that we will develop these new habits quickly and easily. It will take a lot of effort. Introspection, noticing what is happening in the mind, takes effort; remembering to practice takes effort, and actually working with the inhalation and exhalation of the breath takes effort.

Why does establishing healthier habits take so much effort? It is because we have never done it before. But if we work continuously at trying to master the mindfulness techniques and simple wind energy training exercises in this chapter, there will come a point at which they come naturally. When they become a natural expression of the mind, we call them our new habits.

After we begin to practice wind energy training, gradually, when we see a beautiful form, we will not give rise to desire, competitiveness, or jealousy. We will naturally rejoice, and experience the wish that each and every sentient being have that same auspicious and excellent condition in his or her own life. In the same way, when we meet with a situation that would normally cause us to feel pride or arrogance, giving rise to the feeling that we are superior or know better, we will instead feel humble, and wish that all sentient beings have the ability to succeed in all undertakings. And when we see someone who has more than we do, we will simply rejoice in their good fortune.

Breathing through Life's Suffering

KNOWING THAT ALL of life is pervaded by suffering is one of the basic tenets of the Buddhist path. We sometimes wish to avoid reflecting on this basic truth. However, contemplating the nature of suffering is the perfect complement to wind energy training. Through this practice, not only do we have the opportunity to train in deep, abdominal breathing, but this style of contemplation can also lessen our stress, worry, and anxiety. As we begin to intellectually and emotionally realize that all beings are suffering, we can let go of painful emotions, such as basic feelings of loneliness or dissatisfaction with our own lives. We can develop greater empathy, compassion, and patience toward ourselves and others. Coupled with a focus on the inhalation and exhalation of the breath, contemplating the nature of suffering can gradually help us to purify and release old emotional patterns and unhealthy ways of thinking.

ALL-PERVASIVE SUFFERING

The Buddhist teachings tell us that when we take birth in this ordinary world, what we call cyclic existence or samsara, that suffering is all-pervasive. The word *all-pervasive* has serious implications. It means that suffering colors every situation in our lives without exception—if not at this moment, then in the next. The fact that we love means that we will lose. The fact that we have means that we fear not having. Even if we presently feel happy, our wish to maintain that happiness taints the heart and mind with suffering, because what we have cannot last.

The fact that suffering completely pervades the world and all of its inhabitants is a spiritual certainty that we all need to come to terms with. The first step toward accepting all-pervasive suffering is intellectual contemplation. Once we have thoroughly contemplated the ways in which other beings suffer, cutting through some of our own denial, we will start to develop a level of emotional understanding and acceptance of the nature of suffering. Once we come to some emotional acceptance, we can use wind energy training to take our own sorrows and sufferings, as well as those of others, to the spiritual path.

First, Contemplate the Nature of Suffering Intellectually

We resist believing that the world is filled with suffering. It can feel depressing to accept that there is no place in the entire world that is free of suffering, a place to which we can escape. Ordinarily, even if only subconsciously, we think, “If I were able to just go somewhere else, if I were able to have a different kind of life, I would be able to escape the unhappiness I feel in my own life.” This way of thinking shows we lack emotional certainty that unhappiness originates on the inside and is expressed outward. Instead, we are foolishly attached to the idea that unhappiness and suffering are caused by outer circumstances, which then worm their way into the mind. As a result, we become fixated on outer circumstances and on our thoughts of how to manipulate or control them.

As a result, many of us also resist contemplating the topic of samsara. Why spend time thinking about misery? Doesn't that just make us unhappier than we already are? Aren't we trying to get away from the unhappiness we feel in our lives? The answer is that by accepting suffering, we are less controlled by it and less deeply affected. When we cut through unhealthy and unrealistic ways of thinking, we can focus on that which can bring us authentic happiness—an altruistic mind-set and dedication to spiritual practice.

How do we contemplate the idea that suffering completely pervades the entire world around us? We can start by examining the statement, “I cannot find one single place free of suffering in the entire world.” Do we believe that this is true? It seems hard to believe. We often think things like, “If I could just move to Canada, I would be more in agreement with the government and this would make me happy,” or “If I were living in San Francisco, where I agree with other people's lifestyles and values, I would be happy,” or “If I were in Tibet, where people are practicing meditation all of the time, I would not have such difficulty developing my spiritual practice, and I would be happy.” Do these types of thoughts sound familiar? When we habitually think in this way, we fail to realize that each and every living being has his or her own accordant suffering.

Next, Drop the Fantasy of an Ideal Life

We often idealize the lives of others, whether they live in our own community, our country, or are part of another culture. We fantasize that a life different from ours—any life—is happier than the life we have. We all have these fantasies, and even though we may not want to admit it, we cling to them when times are tough. We do not want to surrender to the truth of suffering: that there is no escape, regardless of our achievements, possessions, or experiences. We want to believe that things could be made better if we had more control; if we had more money; if our spouse acted

differently; if our parents had loved us more; if we received more attention and support; if we had a better job; if people recognized our talents and abilities; if that terrible thing hadn't happened to us; even if we had a different president. "If only . . . if only . . ."—this has been our constant friend, the mantra we have recited throughout our entire lives. Rather than being individuals who are ready to change and become happier people, we stay right where we are, full of excuses and blame in order to explain why we can't be satisfied with our present situation. For that reason, we should reflect on the different kinds of suffering experienced by people whose lives we tend to idealize.

Exercise 17

REFLECT ON YOUR OWN FANTASIES

Each of us has our own fantasies, related to who we are and what kind of life we've lived. Many of us idealize people we know and interact with in our ordinary lives: our professors, teachers, therapists, friends, parents, or coworkers. We all have our own sense of what is desirable, and we can let it build up in our minds as the symbol of what we don't have (what we lack), the thing we should have (what we deserve), or the thing that isn't fair (what should be better or different). Identifying the people in your own life whom you believe have it easier, happier, or better than you can elucidate the nature of the projecting mind. Whenever you notice that a fantasy has taken shape in your mind, be sure to recognize it with introspection and bring your mind back to the breath, breaking the cycle of thoughts, and remind yourself that even the person you idealize the most is suffering based on the specific situations in his or her own life.

What follows are some examples of common fantasies and ideals, and of how to reflect on them so that we realize them for what they are. These examples may not express the particular fantasy that you cling to the most, but they can be adapted to be relevant to your own personal fantasies. Making these contemplations pertinent to your personal fantasies is essential so that they become useful contemplative tools.

The suffering of artists, entrepreneurs, and corporate giants. We may have the fantasy that if we did something glamorous and innovative, which resulted in widespread admiration and financial success, then we would be happy. However, suffering ensues from our worldly work. No matter what kind of work we do, suffering will result. If our company is not doing well financially, we may worry that the business will collapse. If our company is doing well but not growing, we may worry that business is stagnant. We are never satisfied with what we have, so no matter what is happening in our professional lives, we will hunger for something else. This hunger

causes mental stress, unhappiness, and suffering.

We may fantasize that using our creative talents would emotionally and spiritually satisfy us and bring us lasting happiness. However, even if we create a wonderful product, concept, or work of art, others may dislike and judge it, or copy it and sell our idea to someone else. Or, we may create an artistic masterpiece but live in poverty. No matter what kind of work we do, it will be the cause of accumulating negative karma because we will feel anger, attachment, jealousy, pride, and ignorance in relation to our work. We should reflect on the fact that this karma will ripen as suffering.

The suffering of presidents and world leaders. Even if we fantasize about a glorified position such as being the leader of a country—a president or a prime minister, for example—we should reflect on the fact that life is still mired in suffering. In order to become president, there is the great suffering of chasing after millions of dollars in order to get on the ballot for election. While on the campaign trail, there is the suffering of making promises that cannot be kept because future compromise is inevitable. Even after we win the election, even that great success does not bring us even one day of happiness. For the term of our administration, we have to worry about every decision made and every word spoken because of the way that our decisions and words may be interpreted and repeated. We will have to shoulder massive no-win political or global situations, during which we will look bad and fuel the hatred of many, no matter what we decide. We should contemplate the fact that great negative karma is accumulated based on this type of high status position, which ripens as suffering.

The suffering of the independently wealthy. Even though we know the old adage “Money can’t buy happiness,” we often still fantasize that it does. Many of us have probably imagined what it would be like to have unlimited financial resources, and to give up all of the normal responsibilities that ordinary people have to deal with, such as doing what we are told and working long hours. However, even those with unlimited financial resources experience great suffering. We may fall out of touch with others because we have such a different lifestyle, and thus feel isolated. We may lack the structure that comes from having to organize our time, and may not feel an urgent need to develop ourselves spiritually, since we have all that money can buy. We may experience great fear about facing life in the future without money. Others may use us for our money, and we may not be sure who our true friends are. And yet, our wealth will never keep us from facing the suffering of old age, illness, the death of loved ones, or any other existential suffering. Our abundant wealth will be the cause of accumulating negative karma because we will feel anger, attachment, jealousy, pride, and ignorance in connection to our wealth. We should contemplate the fact that this

karma will ripen as suffering.

The suffering of great beauties. We often fantasize about the lives of people who are uncommonly beautiful. We think to ourselves, “It must be so wonderful to be admired by others.” But we fail to think about what great suffering ensues based on having an attractive appearance. If we enjoy a beautiful appearance, we may become attached to our own beauty. We may find ourselves constantly worrying about how we look. As a result of this mental anxiety, we experience the sufferings related to maintaining a youthful appearance: depriving ourselves of food, peeling off our skin or using harsh chemicals on it, and spending hard-earned money on plastic surgery and cosmetic treatments. We may feel competitive toward others, thinking, “Is he or she more attractive than me?” We may fear losing the admiration of others, and as a result we experience anger, attachment, jealousy, pride, and ignorance in relation to our physical appearance. We should reflect on the fact that this karma will ripen as suffering.

The suffering of celebrities. We may think it must be incredible and fulfilling to be on stage. Have we ever stopped to think about how much suffering being in the public eye brings? To achieve stardom, singers and actors may be driven by great ambition and hopes of fame. But at what price? Caring deeply about achieving fame and stardom may cause marriages and families to fall apart. The tabloids are filled with stories of the family feuds and divorces of the stars. Every detail of our lives, whether it be true or not, may be shared online by our fans and critics, and our photos may be doctored and printed on magazine covers to entertain consumers as they wait in line at the grocery store. We may become jealous and competitive, wanting to maintain status, fame, and fans. The wish to captivate the hearts and minds of many causes us to experience anger, attachment, jealousy, pride, and ignorance—what we know as the five poisons. We should reflect on the fact that this karma will ripen as suffering.

Exercise 19

CONTEMPLATE ORDINARY SUFFERING

The fact that each being has its own accordant suffering means that no matter who we are, whether we have a prominent place or the humblest place in society, we all experience suffering. Reflect on all of the ordinary suffering that each and every living being experiences. Many of us face the unbearable suffering of the death of a child. All of us will experience being separated from our parents, either by emotional estrangement or by death. If we are married or in a long-term relationship, that relationship will either break up or end with the death of one of the partners. Many of us have families that do not behave like families due to alcoholism or other kinds of

addictions, and we grow up lacking stability and intimacy. Even if we do have a more stable family life, we will still experience the suffering of disagreements, arguing, and fighting.

All of us will experience illness and problems with our health. Sooner or later, we will watch our own bodies break down and decay. We may experience the suffering derived from wealth—of wanting to maintain the wealth that we have, or of wanting to protect our wealth from being taken or lost. We may experience the suffering of poverty—either actual poverty or mental poverty and discontentment.

There are even simpler forms of suffering. When it is hot outside, we wish it were cool. When it is winter, we cannot wait for summer. Suffering results from ordinary actions such as eating. When we eat too much, it is painful to have too much food in the body. Or, when our bellies are completely empty, we hunger for food.

There is the suffering brought by the development of technology in our society. For example, in developed countries, there have been amazing developments in medicine, energy sources, and interconnectivity, such as the Internet. Although there are many benefits to having such developments in technology, great suffering also results from it. From technology we create poisons and weapons. We contaminate our food supply. This may cause us to romanticize a lack of technology, thinking, “When there is no technology, everything is natural, everything is wonderful.” However, without technology, beings experience the sufferings of not having vaccinations and medical cures. There is the suffering of not knowing how to grow enough food to feed the population, which results in famine. There is the suffering of not knowing how to maintain clean water. There is the suffering of not knowing how to prevent illnesses at birth and in childhood, leading to tragic mortality.

Exercise 20

CONTEMPLATE THE EQUALITY OF ALL PEOPLE AND PLACES

There is no place in the world that we could go that does not have its own characteristic, accordant suffering. We do not suffer because we have done something wrong, and we do not suffer because we “deserve” it. We are not somehow flawed because we experience life as painful and difficult. This is simply the world we live in.

Do not mistake the meaning of this contemplation, thinking it to be an exercise in being judgmental. The point is not that people are inherently selfish or wrong. The point is to realize that each and every being must face suffering, and the suffering they must face is distinct based on the circumstances and the unique features of their lives.

So often we think to ourselves, “If I only had what that person has, I would not have to face the suffering that I have now.” In fact, that may be true—that person may not be facing the same suffering we are because his or her life may contain hundreds of variables different from our own. One thing is certain: that person is facing suffering derived from their specific circumstances.

Once we have become certain that suffering is all-pervasive through extensive reflection and contemplation, such as suggested above, we can use wind energy training on the cushion as well as in our everyday lives to help us face the difficult situations before us each day.

As we learned in chapter 6, mindfulness linked with introspection is an indispensable tool for working with our minds on a moment-by-moment basis. When we face difficulties, our practice will do us no good if we forget to use it! It is important that we constantly try to cultivate awareness of what is happening in the mind, and also awareness of our respiratory rate and how we are breathing. Otherwise, we lose the chance to influence our breathing rate and patterns, and thus relax body and mind.

When we lack awareness about what is happening in our own minds, and awareness of the breath, we think, “I need to escape from this life that I’m living.” But when we become more skillful at remembering to use wind energy training in the face of difficult situations, the question is not, “To where will I escape?” It becomes, “How do I remain in my ordinary life now, but decrease the experience of suffering?” When we recognize that we are chasing after the fantasy that someone else has a life that is somehow better than what we have, and then come back to the breath, our own personal experience of suffering decreases. We are able to act mindfully and thoughtfully to benefit others, and we become happier ourselves.

Exercise 21

CONTEMPLATE SUFFERING WITH AWARENESS OF THE BREATH

Probably, when we think about working with difficult situations as part of our spiritual practice, we are thinking about the contentious or painful moments we face in our daily lives. As practitioners of wind energy training, we can use our training to help us face those difficult moments. However, formal sitting on the meditation cushion is also extremely important. Without sitting on the cushion, taking time to reflect on the miserable nature of samsara, and developing loving-kindness and compassion, we will struggle to make a strong emotional and spiritual connection.

As we learned in chapter 4, we begin our sitting practice with a short session of

yoga, sit in the Seven-Point Posture, generate a compassionate motivation, and then practice the Nine-Cycle Breathing. Next, we simply work with the inhalation and exhalation naturally as we contemplate the nature of samsara. When we contemplate the nature of samsara as a sitting practice, we can use the contemplations presented earlier in this chapter, or we can reflect on the all-pervasive nature of suffering in any way that helps us to emotionally connect with and accept this truth. If we notice the mind becoming upset or agitated by our reflecting on the sufferings of ourselves and others, we can place more attention on elongating the breath as we inhale and exhale to help ourselves relax. Or we can simply drop the contemplation for a few minutes, and simply focus one-pointedly on the breath until we relax again.

Exercise 22

CULTIVATE LOVING-KINDNESS

If we feel ready to move beyond simply reflecting on the nature of samsara, we can change our formal sitting practice slightly.

After we have prepared for sitting practice by doing a short session of yoga, sitting in the Seven-Point Posture, generating a compassionate motivation, and practicing the Nine-Cycle Breathing, we can generate loving-kindness and compassion for others. This is traditionally done in Buddhist practice by using a very simple prayer, and we can combine this prayer with the inhalation and exhalation of the breath.

Begin by thinking, “May beings be free of suffering and the cause of suffering,” and inhale. Then exhale, thinking, “May beings have happiness and the cause of happiness.” Keeping the words of this prayer in mind, we can kindle the twofold wish contained within the prayer within our own heart as we focus one-pointedly on the inhalation and exhalation of the breath. We can recall our own suffering, the suffering of a loved one, or even that of a being we have never met. We can work with this verse as often as we like, sometimes resting quietly and simply focusing on the breath until we finish our session of sitting meditation.

Exercise 23

PRACTICE TONGLÉN

After working with the prayer above for several weeks or perhaps months, we will start to develop a genuine wish for beings to be free of suffering and to experience happiness. When that wish surfaces naturally within us, we can again change our formal sitting practice and start working with the wind energy training called *Tonglén*.

Tonglen is a Tibetan word that is literally translated as “sending and receiving.” What are we sending? We are sending out the breath, along with our own peace of mind, happiness, and our good wishes to all living beings. What are we receiving? We are taking in the breath, and also metaphorically taking on the suffering of others. In other words, we mentally wish to develop the ability to take on the suffering of others. We need not be frightened by this practice. We are just ordinary beings, and we are not actually capable of taking on another’s suffering. Any fears that may come up in the mind are just our self-attachment talking!

We can also apply the wind energy practice of *Tonglen* to ourselves and the difficulties we face in our own lives. As we are sitting on the cushion, we can bring to mind anything that is bothering us. The mind is constantly recycling patterns of thought, and whether they are really important or not, those thoughts cause us to suffer. So we need not worry about not having something to work with for this practice. No matter what comes up in the mind, we think, “How many other beings there must be on the planet who are suffering in a similar way at this moment.” As we inhale, think, “May I take on that suffering for them, since I am already suffering.” Then, as we exhale, whether or not we really feel great, we bring to mind a feeling of calm and relaxation and think, “May all sentient beings feel peace of mind and harmony.” We imagine that we are sharing that with others as we send out the breath.

Exercise 24

WIND ENERGY TRAINING AS HEALING

Tibetan medicine is very effective, but there are certain illnesses it can’t heal—diseases such as leprosy or HIV/AIDS, autoimmune diseases, cancer, and illnesses that require treatment by antibiotics. The highly developed and expensive medical treatments needed for these types of illnesses were historically unavailable in Tibet. As a result, many Tibetans had to rely instead on spiritual practice for healing. Fortunately, many lamas of old, who had great spiritual capacity and realization, were able to cure even these serious kinds of illnesses based on a practice such as *Tonglen*.

Even though we may not be at the level of these ancient lamas, we can use *Tonglen* as a healing practice. When experiencing great physical or emotional pain, it is taught that if we focus on the pain of others, our own pain level will actually decrease. As we breathe in, we can think, “May I take on all the pain of others who are hurting as much as I am,” and then as we breathe out, think, “May all living beings enjoy peace, happiness, and health.” No matter what kind of suffering we face, whether we are sitting on the cushion, whether it be in our daily lives, whether it is fabricated by the

mind, whether it is actually happening, whether that suffering is great or large—using the technique of Tonglen allows us to be victorious over suffering.

If we are ill, or when we have received a medical diagnosis we must contend with, we can use the practice of Tonglen in a slightly different way. Let's take the example of suffering from cancer. We know that beings all over the world are suffering from cancer in a similar manner as we may be. As we breathe out, we visualize the breath as dirty, heavy, black soot. We breathe out the impurity of that illness. As we do so, we think, "May I dispel the illness of all beings who are suffering just like me." Then, as we breathe in, we see the breath as pure clear light, and think, "Based on taking in the vitality of the five elements, may my own illness and that of everyone who is suffering just like me be healed." We can imagine the vitality of the five elements as clear light covering our entire body, inside and out, and also penetrating the bodies of beings all over the world. We may not be at the level of realization where we are able to cure ourselves, or have the ability to cure others, but we can still use this practice to develop our love, compassion, and sense of connection with others. And, from the point of view of the Tibetan tradition, it is possible that such practices can cause the progression of illness to slow or recede, and for some at least some healing can occur—even for a novice practitioner.

EVERYDAY ENGAGED PRACTICE

Difficult situations, large and small, are arising at every moment. Try this: make a list of all of the opportunities you would have had to work with wind energy training today had you remembered to notice the reaction in your mind and turn your awareness back to your breathing pattern. Your list might look something like this:

1. Woke up feeling discouraged about another day of hard work at the office
2. Felt impatient with my husband, who did not put the dishes away the night before
3. Frustrated by traffic on the way to work
4. Person in front of me drove too slowly
5. Sun blinded me as I was driving
6. At work, too much stacked on my desk
7. Supervisor criticized project from last week
8. Someone made the coffee too strong
9. Coworker not pulling his share of the load

10. Mom called, upset about Aunt Jane in the hospital
11. Got a paper cut
12. Supervisor snapped at me
13. Office finances are stressed, high stress in the office

And so on. . . .

This may help us to actually see how many difficult situations we experience during the day! We can use our list to cultivate more awareness of our state of mind and of how we breathe. We might choose just one situation from our list and focus on that for a week or two. For example, if we choose “getting irritated while driving,” we could choose the times when we are driving in the car each day to cultivate more awareness of our mental state and also of our respiratory pattern. After we start to notice ourselves having more awareness while we drive, we can make a new list, and choose a new situation to work with.

Conclusion

Breath Is Wisdom

IN THIS BOOK we have reflected on and worked at length with the many expressions of the ordinary wind-mind. We have understood it to contribute to physical illnesses through depriving our blood, brain, and organs of oxygen and carbon dioxide when we breathe thoracically. We have understood it to be an expression of neurosis: of the ordinary mind's emotional responses and habits. We have understood it to be an expression of nying lung: Tibetan medicine's way of describing the extreme buildup of energy in the chest that fuels cardiopulmonary disorders and erratic or strong emotions and behavior. We have also understood it is a contributing factor to stress, which can further develop into anxiety and depression, or exacerbate our physical ailments. However, we have also understood the wind-mind as something that can be trained and something that can be purified. By training and purifying the wind-mind, the natural wisdom dwelling inside of us as Buddha Nature begins to shine through.

It takes a leap of faith to believe that spiritual realization is possible. Many of us lack the confidence and self-esteem it takes to believe that we are capable of expressing such qualities as selflessness, altruism, and wisdom. Wind energy training can help us change this ingrained way of thinking. Through this practice, making small changes in our lives helps us build the confidence that larger changes are possible. Step by step, we are capable of transformation! Even if we do not believe in the idea of spiritual enlightenment, we can use our powers of intellect, logic, and reason to accept the idea that all the impurity of body and mind can be purified.

Purification of karma and the mind's ordinary tendencies and reactions are the keys to this practice. Throughout this book, we have reflected on how wind energy training, and retraining ourselves to breathe abdominally, helps us to change our habitual, unhealthy reactions and habits of body and mind. Having understood the way in which the breath, the wind energy, is an underlying cause of so many physical and mental imbalances, we have the capability, right here and now, to stop this cycle. By purifying the patterns of impure wind energy that rise up in the body, we actually change our deeply ingrained physical, mental, and emotional patterns.

Wind energy training is such an easy and powerful practice that it is accessible to everyone—if only for the simple reason that we must breathe to stay alive. Take a moment to call to mind all the support we have for spiritual development. We often focus on how our life circumstances are difficult and painful. We forget all the

supportive conditions we have to help us on our spiritual journey. For example, we are extremely fortunate in that we know how to speak and use language. As a result, when we are given instructions on how to practice the spiritual path, we have the ability to put them into practice. Also, for most of us, our basic subsistence needs are fulfilled. As a result, we have the physical and mental energy, as well as time, to focus on spiritual practice.

Practicing the wind energy trainings offered in this book may be our very first encounter with breath yoga. But we don't have to be an experienced yogi to benefit from the teachings in this book. All of us are equally capable of working with the inhalation and exhalation of the breath. After the lessons and insights of this book, we may see the practice of breath work as a wish-fulfilling gem that we never knew we carried until now.

This wish-fulfilling gem eradicates our suffering the more we practice. It staves off physical and mental illnesses. It cultivates emotional stability. On a daily basis, it can bring us greater peace of mind because we carry the breath with us wherever we go. No matter what is happening in the moment, we need not disengage from life for a second to “practice.” We simply need to remember to practice breathing!

Because wind energy training is such an easy practice to take up and because the results are so beneficial—immediately and long-term—there is no excuse for putting it off. The instructions on how to purify impure wind energy are more valuable than gold. They can completely transform our cyclic, habitual patterns of suffering. Wind energy training represents complete abundance in our lives. There is no shortage of anything—we have all the support and opportunity we need to practice. The only thing that stands in our way is us—and whether or not we choose to step onto the spiritual path.

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