

TWO SHORT CHANTS:

A Practice Of Connection

NEIL W. MCKINLAY



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*To all of us who explore
the Online Gatherings together.*

Cover Image by Chris Montgomery
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INTRODUCTION

The matter of chanting came up shortly after we opened the Online Gatherings community. Someone said, "I would love to have the opportunity to chant together," which we were not doing at that point in time. This admission gave rise to a considerable flurry of agreement.

Chanting is a wonderful practice. And while there are many ways we can think of chanting, it is, in essence, a practice of connection. It is an opportunity for us to connect not just with the teachings, not just with various expressions of what we're doing as meditators and human beings, but with 'ourselves' - the air quotes acknowledging the porousness of this experience - and with one another as well. Immersing in the energetics of what one might call a 'chanting field' is an opportunity to connect on this last level as well.

Chanting on Zoom, however, presents some notable challenges to this sense of connection. When we're looking at the text instead of noticing one another, when we have our microphones open and there's that cacophony of sound happening when we speak at the same time, when we encounter the audio lag this technology introduces

between us - all of this can fracture our sense of interpersonal linkage.

Given this, I've long wondered if there might be a way to engage this practice in online environments that preserves - or maybe even enhances - the feeling of connectedness between us. I've wondered if there is a way to chant together on Zoom, or whatever other platform we are using, that strengthens all the other layers of connection the practice allows.

With this in mind, what follows is a quick introduction to two short chants that were introduced after the admission noted at the outset had lingered a while. One of these opens our time together in the Online Gatherings; the other concludes each session. Both of these consist of four short lines, a fact that has considerable relevance to the questions raised above.

CONNECTIONS

Before offering a brief introduction to and exploration of each of these two short chants, I'd like to share a few words about some of the ways - 'some' because there are invariably others - these foster and enhance connectedness of many kinds.

These chants are easy to memorize, for one thing. Because of this, we don't have to sit with pieces of paper in front of us as we give voice to them. We can instead recite the liturgies from memory and maintain at least a small amount of visual contact with the people around us.

The short lines also minimize the amount of time lag that occurs between us. Even when our shared space is muted there will still be a lag, of course. For this reason, when we're reciting online there will be a short pause at the end of each line.

When we're chanting in person, we're often instructed not to stop at the end of each line, to just keep things flowing. While on Zoom, however, we introduce a short pause as each line concludes. This acknowledges the time lag's existence and gives us an opportunity to come

together again - to reconnect energetically before we begin the next one.

This pause also allows us a few seconds within which we can receive any wisdom our embodied lives might be offering. Embodied experience is intelligent and expressive. It is constantly bringing forth flashes of insight about what is happening right now. We say the word 'pear', for instance, and embodiment might just offer some sort of image or shimmer or sensation in response. The pause between lines noted here allows this expressiveness to be recognized, to be welcomed and connected with within the practice of chanting.

Which very nicely eases into another point: each of these chants - each of the four lines in these short chants - reminds us of some important aspects of what we're doing in the Online Gatherings. Each offers some important perspectives on and/or understandings of the path of exploration and discovery that embodied meditation - that our embodied lives - offer. So these short chants connect us in this way as well.

And because these lines are short - because their articulation consists of only a few words - they actually arise quite naturally in the course of our daily lives. Words and phrases have been known to pop up in grocery stores and work meetings, in all kinds of places and situations. In doing so, they add another layer of connection to this practice: connecting the attitudes and perspectives of our practice life with the stuff of everyday living.

OPENING CHANT

The opening chant is done at the beginning of a practice session. Of course, this can be recited whenever and however we feel fit in our lives. In the context of the Online Gatherings, however, we typically do this as we enter a practice session.

More specifically, this chant is recited after we've turned our attention toward embodied experience for a moment or two, placed our hands over our hearts - the left on the heart affirming our innate relationship with life; the right holding the left, holding the integrity of this linkage - and before we embody our intention to bring this connection into the coming session with a bow.

Our opening chant reads as follows:

Embodied experience
Inclusive and alive
I rest in this perfection
With curiosity and appreciation

Embodied experience: Embodied experience is the ground of our work together. It is both what we explore

and what we discover through our practice. Not 'the body,' particularly, a term which can suggest a measure of boundedness and separation, but the openness and the embracing-ness of our full and oh so human - and, importantly, our oh so other than human - embodied experience.

Inclusive and alive: 'Inclusive' in the sense of including ultimately everything; embodied experience - and, by extension, our practice and our lives - includes everything. I know when I practice and certainly when I live, there's a tendency to try and cut things out. Consider the simple experience of sense perceptions whilst meditating. 'I don't want to see that,' I often think to myself. 'That sound is really distracting from my practice; I wish it would go away.' What we're being reminded of here is that embodied experience is inclusive. It is also alive in the sense of being dynamic and changing and mysterious.

I rest in this perfection: 'Rest' reminds us of the foundation of our embodied explorations. Shamatha. Stability. Settling. Lingering. Presence. Rest. 'Perfection', on the other hand, reminds us that, personal preferences aside, embodied experience is always perfectly what it is. If I stub my toe, for instance, I may not like it much, but that experience is exactly what it is. This doesn't mean I don't respond at some point. It doesn't mean I don't put ice on my aching toe. It does, however, remind me that embodied experience always arises as what it is. A stubbed toe is a stubbed toe - perfectly so.

With curiosity and appreciation: 'Curiosity' points to the

openness of what Shunryu Suzuki calls “beginner’s mind.” This is the mind that holds more questions than answers, more possibilities than certainties. It is the mind of mystery and revelation. It is the mind of what Buddhism calls the ‘prajnaparamita’: a knowing beyond our ideas and expectations. ‘Appreciation’ has two possible resonances here. One is that sense of appreciating embodied experience for what it is. Seeing and feeling and knowing our this moment and our lives as they truly are. And out of this, perhaps experiencing another sense of appreciation: gratitude.

So there it is, the opening chant of the Online Gatherings:

Embodied experience
Inclusive and alive
I rest in this perfection
With curiosity and appreciation

CLOSING CHANT

The closing chant is done at the end of a practice session. Of course, this can be recited whenever and however we feel fit in our lives. In the context of the Online Gatherings, however, we typically do this as we conclude a practice session.

More specifically, this chant is recited after we've turned our attention toward embodied experience for a moment or two, placed our hands over our hearts - the left on the heart affirming our innate relationship with life; the right holding the left, holding the integrity of this linkage - and before we embody our intention to bring this connection into the world with a bow.

Our closing chant reads as follows:

This life is a gift
I welcome it fully
I share what is given
With all

This life is a gift: 'This life' is the first thing that strikes me here. Actually, 'this life' is the first thing that strikes many of us. *This* life. My life. Right now. With all its joys and sorrows, ups and downs. This life is a gift; it is not a given. Instead, this life is the result of an utterly unique confluence of causes and conditions that have come together in the unprecedented cosmic event that each of us is. In traditional language, this life is conditional and dependent. Put in a more commonplace way, this life is a gift.

I welcome it fully: Welcoming reaffirms the foundation of meditation practice: shamatha, stability, settling, presence, rest. As our capacity to be in this moment deepens, we become more and more able to welcome our lives - whatever they might be. In my experience, welcoming is supported by a view that sees this life as a gift and by the understanding that welcoming *fully* is something I aspire toward much more than realize. Welcoming is supported, in other words, by appreciation, gentleness, and patience.

I share what is given: There are at least two ways to understand 'share' here. 'Share' in the sense of offering to others and 'share' in the sense of having in common with others. Affirming the inclusiveness of embodied experience, what we encounter in meditation practice and what we encounter in our lives is by no means ours alone. It has been encountered by countless others since the beginning of time - it is shared. And it is something we let come into the world for the benefit of all - it is to be shared.

With all: An earlier version of this chant featured 'With

others' as its final line. 'With all' is an interesting adjustment. It blurs the distinction between self and other, human and nonhuman, seen and unseen. This blurring gives the sharing noted in the penultimate line much broader implications. In this iteration, I share what is given not only with others. The inspiration and aspiration here is broader and, quite appropriately, more inclusive. I share what is given *with all*.

So our closing chant reads like this:

This life is a gift
I welcome it fully
I share what is given
With all

THE ONLINE GATHERINGS

As has been noted throughout this ebook, the two chants presented here and the talk introducing them arose within something known as the Online Gatherings.

The Online Gatherings is a subscription-based community of meditators that has been evolving in the online universe since early 2020.

More specifically, the Online Gatherings is a community of practitioners who:

1. Believe meditation can help us connect with the innate wisdom of our person, our communities, and our lives;
2. Gather in order to develop a practical understanding of the teachings and practices of meditation;
3. Encourage and empower, inspire and support one another as we familiarize with this innate wisdom in our practice, our lives, and our world.

With the option of accessing as many as three live Zoom meetings each week - as well as archived recordings, online discussions, and a range of other resources - this community has gradually become one of the most

affecting meditative contexts I have ever encountered.

Central to the Gatherings' potency is the sense of encouragement and empowerment noted above. In a variety of ways, we are developing a sense that each of us has something uniquely valuable to offer our collective journey. This is true if we are experienced meditators and true if we are new to the practice. It is true if we consider ourselves 'good' meditators and true if we consider ourselves 'not so good' in this regard.

As we learn to trust this fact, relax with this fact, and show up as we are week after week, month after month, and year after year, something remarkable is happening in our midst. What buddhism calls 'the basic nature' - the transformative knowing that is innate in each of us - can be felt flowing among us. The results of this, as has already been mentioned, have been deeply affecting for me personally; I know I am not alone in this regard.

In this time of challenge and uncertainty, I believe meditators and contemplative people of all sorts have an opportunity to bring this unique resource into the world for the benefit of all. My aspiration is that the Online Gatherings will be part of this undertaking - and that people like you will be inspired to join us.

To learn more about this community please check out neilmckinlay.com/meditation/online-gatherings/. Having done this, I hope you are moved to give the Gatherings experience a try.

- Neil W. McKinlay

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Neil McKinlay is a meditation teacher and mentor. Reflecting a longstanding interest in how this work enriches and is enriched by our everyday lives, he offers a range of resources that encourage and empower us to let the wisdom we touch through our practice come into the world we share. These include two online communities (the free to access Living Meditation Network and the subscription-based Online Gatherings) and the 'Bringing Meditation to Life' podcast.

For more about Neil's work - including guided meditation practices and a current teaching schedule - please visit neilmckinlay.com.

