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Coming to Balance

We are best served when we are fully present with our three brains¹: Head (cephalic), heart (cardiac) and gut (enteric). Yet most of us spend most of our time “in our heads.” This exercise will help you come to balance, centering yourself with full access to all three brains. As you practice it over time, you will develop the ability to do it at any time in any place and without the physical movements that are described here. It will also require less and less time to bring you into balance.

Each of the brains has specific functions that it performs best: head brain – creativity, problem-solving, logic, reasoned thinking; heart brain – passion, compassion, values; gut – courage, self-protection, who you are at your core. The sequence below is a standard flow, starting at the heart then moving to the head. It is possible to change the sequence, moving from the heart to the gut as the first and second positions. It is recommended that the starting and ending point is the heart, and that when moving between head and gut you stop at the heart as well.

Begin by sitting upright, plant your feet firmly on the ground, and soften your gaze or close your eyes. Place your hands over your heart and breathe in to a six count and out to a six count. Continue this even in and out breath until you begin feel the energy shift in your body. You may feel your shoulders drop, your muscles loosen, your face and/or other areas of your body relax.

Move your hands to in front of your forehead as you continue your even in and out breath. Allow the mind to be as clear of thoughts as you can. When they arise, let them drift away again. When you are ready return to the heart.

Breathe in for six counts and out for six counts. Continue to breath with your heart until you are ready to move again.

Next move your hands to your gut. Remain with the even breathwork in and out. When you are ready, return to the heart one last time.

Finish with even breathwork as your hands remain in front of your heart. Slowly drop your hands, return to your normal breath, and open your eyes fully.

To further advance this practice, as you move to each location, send your breath to that location. You may also think of the function at that location that you want to call on (e.g. “I am breathing into my passion”).

¹ You can find a brief description of the three brains on the second page of this document.



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Breath and Our Three Brains

Some neuroscientists refer to each of our brains using the term “brain” while others limit that term to refer to the brain in our head and refer to the others as “neuron clusters.” Nonetheless, there is agreement that all three contain motor and sensory neurons; all three collect, analyze, store, and retrieve data; and all three experience similar electrochemical activity.

Head (Cephalic) Brain: This is the brain we most often think of. While it is an extremely complex organ consisting of multiple regions, two of those are most important here. In the front of the cephalic brain is the prefrontal cortex. This is the newest part of the brain and is the center of our creativity, logic, problem-solving, reasoned thinking, etc. In other words, it is where we typically do those activities referred to as thinking. The prefrontal cortex is triggered in .1 seconds. Toward the lower rear of our brain is the amygdala, the site of our “fight, flight, freeze, appease” response. The amygdala is triggered in .07 seconds. Depending on how significantly it is triggered, the electrochemical response of the amygdala can limit, or even completely block, access to the prefrontal cortex.

Heart (Cardiac) Brain: The cardiac brain is the smallest of the three in terms of number of neurons. It is the seat of passion, compassion, and our values. Neuroscientists can measure the energy of the heart up to ten feet away.

Enteric (Gut) Brain: The enteric brain contains about the same number of neurons as a cat brain. It stretches from the esophagus to the other end of the digestive tract. It is the seat of our courage, our self-protection, and who we are at our core.

Vagus Nerve: Communication between the three brains takes place through the vagus nerve. Based on the cell structure of the vagus nerve, neuroscientists believe that about 90% of the communication is upward.

Nervous Systems: Breathing in activates the sympathetic nervous system. This is the system that is associated with our amygdala and our “fight, flight, freeze, appease” response. Breathing out activates the parasympathetic nervous system. This is the nervous system that relaxes us.

Coming to Center Breathwork: The coming to center breathwork described above brings the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems and the three brains into alignment. This, in turn, allows for an uninterrupted flow of communication between them. In the absence of such alignment, the electrochemical activity sparked by the amygdala can limit or block communication between the cardiac and enteric brains and the prefrontal cortex as well as limiting or blocking our conscious access directly to the prefrontal cortex.