



The **B R A H M S** Practice for Inner Peace

By Cynthia Overweg

Introduction: Inner stillness helps restore our resilience, renew our energy and reclaim our equilibrium. We can then look at *what is* without being overwhelmed by it. We can act from compassion and wisdom, rather than react from stress, anger or sorrow. It's all about self-care and slowing down.

The acronym BRAHMS is a way of remembering a sequence of six steps that relax and nourish body, mind and heart. This appeared to me as a kind of map while I was putting together a way of inviting inner stability and quietude for a retreat that I was facilitating in California. Johannes Brahms was of course a great classical music composer, who also wrote a famous lullaby that many of us heard as children.

The BRAHMS practice can create a sense of peace and build resilience when we feel stressed, so that we can live in a deeper, more grounded awareness. Setting aside a few minutes a day to gently practice these suggested steps can renew our energy and help us reclaim equilibrium.

Please note: These six suggestions are not medical advice. They are simple approaches to quieting the mind and relaxing the body. Choose a quiet and safe place where you can relax and feel at ease.



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Breathe, Relaxation, Attention, Heart wisdom, Meditation, Serenity of speech.

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1. Breathe. We are rarely aware of our own breath because it happens automatically. But breathing with inner awareness helps us slow down and center ourselves in the body, rather than in the head. Begin by gently and naturally taking a breath, placing your attention on the natural rhythm of your breathing. Notice the expansion and contraction of your lungs, as your chest rises and falls with each breath. With this inner awareness, gently inhale and exhale five complete breaths. Take your time. No rush. Notice the inner quietude that begins to appear.

2. Relaxation. Relax into the present moment and release body tension. Release the story of “me” that is created by our thoughts. After taking a few conscious breaths, bring your attention to your entire body, particularly where there is tension. Most often, we accumulate tension in the jaws, back of the head, neck, throat, shoulders, stomach or back, and sometimes in all of these areas simultaneously. Just noticing where we feel body tension is the first step to relief.

One way of approaching this is to close your eyes, breathe consciously, and do a “body scan.” I like to begin with sensing my feet on the floor and slowly working my way up to my shoulders, face and head, stopping along the way in places where I notice tension or tightness, and breathing into those places with attention, letting muscles relax naturally.

If you prefer to begin with relaxing the body from the head down, that’s okay too. You can start with the top and back of the head, then move to the face and jaws, neck and shoulders, and so on. Many of us hold a lot of tension in our shoulders, as if we’re carrying the weight of the world there. Take it slow and breathe with awareness as you unwind the body’s tension wherever you notice it. When your body scan and relaxation of tension is complete, take a moment to appreciate all the good that is in your life. Relaxation and gratitude have a beneficial effect on our well-being.

3. Attention. Inner attention is the key to conscious living. Breath awareness and body relaxation help us gather our attention inward. Without inner attention, the mind is on auto-pilot and driven by our conditioning; it's not awake; it's reactive and stress builds up in the body. In addition to observing our breath and bringing attention to body relaxation, we can gather our attention by taking a moment to consider the many ways we lose our attention in worry, fear and habitual patterns that scatter our attention and waste precious energy.

Attention is fundamental to a silent pause. Attention clears the mind of useless chatter by interrupting the constant momentum of thought. Two simple ways to gather our attention have already been suggested, and here are two more: Conscious listening and seeing. This sounds so simple, but how often do we take a moment to actually listen to the ordinary sounds of life? The buzzing of a bee; the sound of water as it rushes out of a faucet; the innocent laughter of a child. Listening with our full attention effortlessly brings us into a silent pause. It's the silent awareness that frees us to just *be*.

The same is true when we look at anything that enters our field of vision. Our first tendency is to *name* what we see. Once we name something or someone, there are a set of assumptions and opinions that are part of it. We can't help it. But what if we can let go of naming for a moment? It's not easy because we are creatures of language, yet if we can fully relax with the help of conscious breathing and attentive listening and seeing, then it's possible to glance at a tree or a flower, and for a second or two, not name it. It just *is*. This dimension of attention gives us a taste of our inter-connectedness with the whole of life. For a moment, the illusion of separation disappears and we understand ourselves in a new way.

4. Heart wisdom. A silent pause connects us with the truth in our hearts. In everyday life, we are mostly governed by what the mind is thinking or the task it is working on. We often ignore or we're not aware of an inner urging of conscience that bypasses the conditioned mind and comes directly from the heart. The wisdom of our own heart naturally embraces what unites us, not the mind-made concepts of what divides us.

A silent pause gives us access to the great reservoir of wisdom and compassion at the center of our being; it helps us understand ourselves and others. Connecting to the truth in our own hearts is enhanced by the three previous suggestions of breath awareness, relaxation, and the inner attention of listening. Listen to your heart in the stillness of a silent pause.

5. Meditation. A daily sitting meditation for a few minutes that includes conscious breathing and watching the flow of your thoughts as they come and go, without judging them, is a powerful and simple way to access the peace of inner quietude. Actually, life itself is a meditation when the mind is calm and still. The "BRAHMS" approach begins with meditative attention to the simple things in life, such as preparing a cup of coffee or tea, washing the dishes or walking in nature. The key is your relaxed attention to your inner state of being as you go about your day. It's also important to turn off your digital devices for a while and have a kind and open conversation with a friend or loved one.

Go outside (weather permitting) for a meditative walk. Nature-walks, forest-bathing or beach-walking are soothing to body, mind and spirit—so is gardening, yoga, dancing, bicycling, tennis or any physical activity that gives you joy. Our bodies need daily exercise to relieve stress and help us sleep better; nothing intense, just some simple stretches and gentle motion help enormously.

If a walking meditation or other physical activities are not possible, then do what is possible to strengthen muscles and circulation under a doctor's guidance. Just opening a window and breathing in some fresh air can help us relax and ground us in stillness.

6. *Serenity of speech.* The word “serenity” is derived from the Latin "serenus," which means "clear" or "calm." Silent awareness pauses light the way to a calm and balanced way of living, despite outer circumstances. Central to this way of being is how we use our voice and how we interact with others and the world. When our attention is gathered inward, we can speak truth to power without being strident or angry. We can speak up for ourselves and for those who can't speak for themselves. We can do this in a calm and clear manner that is direct, but does not seek to insult.



The BRAHMS Practice can help us slow down and live with more inner peace, despite outer circumstances. It can help us in our relationships and inspire compassionate action in the world, as well as compassion for ourselves, largely because we're not wasting energy on stress or anger. Engage in all six steps in sequence, or try one or two at a time. It's entirely up to you how to use and integrate this practice into your day.



May the “**BRAHMS**” Practice bring more peace and happiness into your life.

With Loving Wishes, *Cynthia*

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