

Cultivating Shakti Telecourse

Week 4: Contemplations & Homework for Deepening Your Experience

Please meditate for at least 20 minutes each day. You can meditate at any time of day or before bed. And you can practice with any of the meditation instructions here. Deb pulled out a few of the meditations we did during class, so if you like, you can use the audio of any one of these to guide your meditation; they are available on the Student page.

Core Daily Meditation Practice

The first practice below is the same one we have been practicing, in which we inhale the first four syllables of the mantra through the crown down to the heart, then allow the last two syllables to expand the heart. You might prefer to practice with the first week's meditation, focusing on the mantra in the heart center.

Begin by settling into a comfortable upright posture, letting the breath ground you through the sitz bones, and the exhalation help you lengthen your spine up through the crown.

Spend a moment or two scanning the body, noticing any tensions, and softening them with the thought "Soften" or "Let go." If the tension feels strong, tighten that area of the body and then release it.

Chant the mantras on your chanting sheet as we did at the beginning of class.

Offer your meditation for the benefit of all beings, asking that your practice be of service to the whole of life or to a particular person or situation for which you would like to offer blessings.

Invoke Shakti in your native language, saying silently or out loud:

"O goddess Shakti, you whose form is love, wisdom, and invincible strength, please reveal yourself within me. Let me feel your presence, whether in my body, my heart, or my mind. Let me know you as my own self. Let me feel your presence in the world."

Breathe in the Felt Sense of Shakti

For a moment or two, have the feeling of welcoming or allowing the energy of the Goddess to flow into you through the breath.

Let yourself surrender to the feeling of being breathed by the Shakti, whose breath is your breath.

Have the recognition—using these words or your own-- "My skin is made of particles of shakti, subtle divine energy. My bones are solidified Shakti. The goddess has taken form as my flesh. She is the beating of my heart, the blood pouring through my veins. The goddess dances as the thoughts in my mind. She arises as my emotions. The goddess is the energy

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that lives as me. The air I breathe is the goddess. The ground I sit on is the goddess. My whole being is pervaded by the energy, the Shakti of the goddess. I am being lived by the shakti, the blissful freedom of the goddess herself.”

Breathe in the Seed Syllables of the Mantra through the Crown

Have the sense that your crown center opens like the shutter of a camera. Inhaling, have the feeling that the first four syllables of the mantra are flowing in like living liquid or living light through your crown. *Om hreem shreem dum* flow with the breath through the center of your head, through the throat, and upper chest into the heart.

With the exhalation, sense the words *DURGAYE NAMAHA* filling the heart as the exhalation expands the inner body through the chest.

Tune into the energetic sensation of the mantra flowing with the breath, and for a moment, have the understanding that the syllables of the mantra are the sound form of the goddess. Gradually let the mantra mingle with the breath. The intention is to gradually feel the mantra as a flow of grace entering your body.

Feel that the mantra is flowing in through your crown and flowing down to and expanding the heart. Find your own rhythm and feel as you do that the mantra is opening up the inner body, the energetic space beneath your skull, and within the neck and chest. Sense the syllables as subtle energies that softly drop into your heart and softly expand through your heart.

As thoughts arise, when you notice the thought, note it as “thought.” Or try looking at thoughts as manifestations of Goddess. Then, return to the mantra.

At the end, turn your attention back on itself, and become present to the awareness that holds your entire experience. One way to do this is to direct your (closed-eyed) gaze ‘backward’ as if you are ‘looking’ towards the back of your head and notice the indescribable yet always present knowingness that is behind your ordinary perceptions. For a moment, identify that knowingness as your true self. Or ask yourself, “What is aware that I’m doing this practice?” and relax into the felt sense that arises in response.

NEW: Basic Central Channel (Sushumna Nadi) Meditation

Find your posture. Become aware of the natural pelvic triangle formed by the pubic bone in front and the two sitz bones that anchor your posture at the back. (Poke around with your fingers until you locate them). Center your torso so that it feels that you are sitting over the ‘center’ of the triangle. This is a naturally aligned position that allows you to begin to feel the vertical flow of breath.

Locate the perineum, the knob of flesh between the anus and the sexual organ.

Gradually become aware of, or imagine, a “tube” or channel that runs vertically through the center of the body, from the perineum through the crown, parallel to the spinal column.

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Imagine that the inhalation can flow in through the crown of the head, down the center of the body, just in front of the spine.

Allow the breath to flow down the center of the inner body towards the pelvic floor with the inhalation. Let the exhalation flow upwards, touching the heart center, then flowing upwards through the crown.

Let your attention to the breath, and the central channel be soft and subtle; don't try and force the breath in any way. If the breath 'wants' to flow between the pelvic floor and the heart, rather than flowing all the way up to the crown, that's fine. As you sit, you will probably find that the breath and the inner channel begin to merge, and there is a sense of the channel opening and the breath flowing in a more spontaneous way.

After a few minutes, add the mantra to the breath. The inhalation flows downward with *Om Hreem Shreem Dum*. The exhalation flows upward with *Durgaye Namah*. See if you can sense a letting go at the end of the 'ha' as if the exhalation were dissolving into the space over the crown.

End by bringing the inhalation down into the heart and let your last few breaths center in the heart.

NEW: Meditation on Chakras

Place yourself in a strong, comfortable, upright posture. Inhale, feeling that the base of your posture, the hips, and thighs become heavy and grounded, sinking into your seat. Exhale, feeling that your spinal column elongates upwards as if the energy inside the spine were lifting it from within. Inhale, letting your shoulder blades release down your back, Exhale, and let them gently float towards each other. The chin is slightly forward. The face and neck are soft.

The neck lifts up through the crown.

Let your attention flow with the breath as it comes in and flows out through the nostrils.

PAUSE

Sense the presence of a slender column of energy that extends from the base of your spine up through the crown of your head. It is the subtle axis of your body. To find it, let your torso sway gently in a circle, feeling that you are swaying around this subtle pole of energy. As the breath comes in, let your attention move down this column of energy towards the base of the spine. As the breath flows out, let your attention move up the center of the column of energy towards the crown.

PAUSE

With your awareness, you are exploring this channel in the center of your body. You might visualize it as golden, or silver, or white. You might sense it kinetically as a cord of energy.

Place your attention in the root chakra, near the base of the spine, in the very center of the body. Feel now that there is a laser beam of light that runs from this center down into the

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earth. With your awareness, let the beam of light move down through the floor, through the foundation of the building, through the soil, and into the bedrock. Let it move deep into the bedrock, as deep into the solid earth as you can take it.

PAUSE

Now anchor the light beam to a rock. You might imagine an iron ring in the rock and tie the light beam to the ring or feel it melting and fusing with the stone.

Feel that earth energy is flowing up through the laser beam that connects you to the earth. That energy is reddish-brown in color, and it has a deeply nurturing, sustaining quality. Feel this energy spreading through your lower body, through the buttocks and thighs, the knees and calves and feet. Feel the nurturing, solid, grounding quality of this energy. Feel, I am sustained by the earth.

With your attention now in the Muladhara chakra, in the center of your body near the base of the spine, become aware again of the column of energy that runs up the center of the body. Let your awareness flow up that column through the center of your body to the second chakra, the center in the lower belly. This is the center of the water element. Feel your belly filling with the deep calm water of a tropical ocean or a still mountain lake. Feel the softness of the water. Let yourself take a rest there. Have the feeling of “I am healed.”

PAUSE

Allow your attention to ascend up this column of energy in the center of your body into the region around the navel and the solar plexus. Feel it as a circle of energy that extends through your body from just below the navel to just above the diaphragm. You are in the center of the fire element, the center of will and action. Allow the breath to fill the region. Notice any sensations you feel here. Notice the quality of the energy in your solar plexus. Now imagine this whole region filled with the warmth of the fire element. Begin to open to the sensations of inner fire—its energy and power. You might imagine it as a feeling of gentle warmth, or as soft glowing coals, or as dancing, leaping flames. Let yourself experience the light and brilliance of the flames, their warmth, and vitality. Have the thought, “I am filled with vitality. I am fearless.”

PAUSE

Allow your attention to move upwards, into the area in the very center of the chest, behind the breastbone. This is the region of the heart chakra, the subtle heart. Let your attention explore the heart region. Notice how the heart feels. Notice its energy. The heart is the center of air, the center of feeling, and the center of emotions. In the heart, our emotions can be purified and transmuted into compassion, kindness, and love. Feeling the energy in the heart, imagine the heart filled with a gentle breeze, which touches the heart with each breath. Feel the movement of the breath in and out of the heart. The color of the heart may be a soft rose, like the color of a pink sunset. As the wind of the breath moves through the heart, feel the air in the heart gently expanding, opening. The heart expands with the breath and the rhythm of the heartbeat. Rest in the feeling of soft air as it gently expands the heart. Have the thought, “I am loved.”

PAUSE

As the air of the heart expands, your awareness flows upwards, through the upper chest, into the region at the base of the throat. Feel the energy in the throat. This is the subtle center of higher will and intention, as well as expression. The element of the throat center is ether, pure space. As the energy in the throat is purified and expands, we experience the spaciousness of our own essential purity. Feel the throat area filled with space. It is empty, colorless, expansive. The spaciousness is edgeless, vast. Have the thought, "I surrender to the higher will, and through surrender, I create."

As it expands upwards, your attention is drawn to the space in the center of the head, behind the third eye. This is the chakra of the mind, and your experience here is of the vastness of the totally open mind. It is as if your head is in the sky. Feel the absolute openness of the sky, its freedom, and its wideness. Thoughts and feelings float by like clouds. Have the thought, "I am."

Above you shines luminosity, like the brilliance of the sun. Its light is golden white yet cooling. Let your awareness rise upward into the luminosity. This is the place of your highest awareness, the place of unity and love. Rest in the center of light, the center of divinity. Have the thought, "I am light."

PAUSE

Again, become aware of the column of energy, the central channel that runs from the sun at the crown down through your body. Let your awareness move down that column of light, into the sky at the center of your head, through the spaciousness of the throat, into the air of the heart, down through the warmth of the navel, the beautiful clear water of the belly, and into the earthiness of the root chakra. Now, allow the breath to move within the central channel. As the breath comes in, your attention moves down to the Muladhara in the base of the spine. As the breath flows out, your attention moves up the central channel touching the center in the belly, the solar plexus, the heart, the throat, the center between the eyebrows, the crown. Meditate inside the central channel, the inner column of energy and light. Feel how it connects all the levels of your being, from the base to the crown. As the breath moves within that central channel, feel that you are being breathed.

You don't have to breathe. You are being breathed by the life force itself, which moves within the central column of energy, within the center of your body. Rest in that column of light, within your own being.

Meditation on the Space at the End of the Mantra (To try at least once or twice this week)

Sit with the mantra, repeating it as you normally would for a few minutes. Begin to notice the felt space at the end of 'namah.' Focus there, recognizing the dynamic quality of the mind space. Stay in that space until thoughts start to arise. Have the feeling that the mantra arises and subsides from within the space of the mind.

Open-Eyed Practices

To do at any time throughout the week. Some of those below are new, while others were also in last week's homework

Start the day by asking that Shakti, perhaps in the form of Goddess Durga, be present with you today and ask to be able to recognize her presence. Consider offering your day to her.

NEW: This week, practice vertical breathing whenever you have a moment. Following the breath, feel that the inhalation flows down towards the base while the exhalation flows up to the crown. Become aware of (or imagine!) a vertical energetic core that runs parallel to the spinal column, from the region just below the crown to the perineum, the knob of flesh between the anus and the sexual organ. Initially, this will seem like something you are imagining, but through the breathing, you will gradually be able to sense its presence, and it will draw your attention and eventually become a way to center yourself. In time, the breath will carve out a kind of channel that you will feel when you do this practice in meditation and which you will be able to be aware of at other times. The more you internalize your awareness into the inner channel, the more centered you will feel.

From time to time during the day, ask yourself, "Is my mind expanded or contracted?" If you notice that it's contracted, take a moment to breathe and ask yourself, "Can I release contraction?" Often, just asking the question allows an expansion to occur.

When you sense the tension in your body, softly breathe into the area of tension. The sense that the breath is a gentle force of shakti opening and releasing the tightness. If it is habitual tension, you may have to do this several times or come back to it. Try practicing this simply with the breath or fill the breath with mantra and notice whether one of these is more powerful than the other.

Make a point of remembering the mantra through the day, especially when you are walking, doing housework, exercising at the gym, cooking. (Sometimes you might want to sing it or say it out loud, but mostly you'll probably want to repeat it silently) Let your focus on the mantra be soft and slur it slightly since this seems to make the mantra less of an 'object' and more of subtle energy like the breath. Try it with the breath, or just think it. As much as possible, sense the resonance or texture of the mantra as it impacts your energy body.

Find different bhavas (spiritual attitudes) as you say (think) the mantra: for instance, with the feeling that it is being offered into the heart, or with the feeling that the mantra is the Goddess and that you are bringing her presence more and more deeply into your body; asking her through the mantra to be present with you, to protect you, to reveal her power and love within you; with the feeling that you are calling on grace; with the feeling that each repetition of the mantra is giving you strength and energy. You can repeat it like a prayer, offer it for someone else's well-being. Notice any energetic shifts that occur.

From time to time, open fully to the breath with the feeling that you are being breathed. Feel that the breath comes in and out through the pores of your skin. Try this for several breaths with the sense that you are breathing through the front of the body. Then the back of the body. Then begin to feel that the breath is flowing in from all sides and above and

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below. Notice how the breath can soften the skin boundaries so that you feel less separate from the atmosphere around you.

Become very conscious of your words. Notice the effects that the words you use have on your own energy and on the energy in different situations. Become especially conscious of your thinking patterns. When you catch yourself in a negative thinking pattern, a self-criticism or criticism of others, notice the effect and, if appropriate, try to change your negative thought to a neutral or positive one.

From time to time, stop and notice your heartbeat. Feel the slight muscular tightening that allows you to hold a position. Notice and soften any tensions with the thought, “Everything I am experiencing is a form of the Goddess Shakti. The goddess is manifesting as this conversation, this feeling, this action that I’m doing, this person.”

Take moments throughout the day to silently say the Durga mantra to yourself,

Become aware of the space behind your heart. Feel that Durga is standing behind you. Breathe in with the feeling that your breath opens the back of your heart. Exhale with the feeling that the Goddess is breathing her power through you. At a certain point, allow the exhalation to fill you with the feeling that the Goddess’s shakti has become your body.

When you feel uncomfortable, tense, confused, stop and remember that the field of subtle grace offers the contracted or negative feeling to the Goddess, the Shakti. Breathe it out without aversion, feeling that your breath offers the energy of discomfort or tension into the field of grace

Meditation on the Goddess Durga—A Visual Invocation

You may use one of the pictures on the Home Page as a focal point for the meditation. Look at it for a while, then close your eyes and practice the following contemplation. The instructions include a specific visual image. However, don’t feel that you have to do an exact visualization. It’s enough to sense the presence of the energy of Durga in your field. The meditation will work just as well.

Sitting comfortably upright, close your eyes, and imagine yourself sitting in a mountain grove, surrounded by tall peaks.

See the goddess moving towards you from the depths of the mountain. It is as if she comes from a distance, taking shape as she comes closer. She is dazzlingly beautiful, with dark skin and flowing black hair. She is naked to the waist, wearing jeweled necklaces and bracelets. Around her hips is a red silk cloth. Her eyes are large and dark, and in the middle of her forehead is an open, glowing third eye. She rides a tiger, which moves in sinuous grace until they are sitting in front of you. You feel her power as an enormous, embracing, protective love, which begins to envelop you like a cloak.

You may deepen your experience of her presence by inwardly repeating *aum hreem shreem dum durgayei namaha*

You gaze into the goddess’s eyes. She smiles at you, and a beam of golden light flows from her third eye into your forehead. You breathe it in as particles of golden light that stream

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through your brain, removing mental fog and delusion. You may also feel that the mantra flows in with the breath, sensing its energy mingling with the particles of light that mingle with the breath. Allow the golden light to stream through your body.

After a while, you notice that there is a deep red light flowing from her heart into yours. You breathe in the light and feel it streaming through your torso. Feel that as you breathe out, you breathe out your own obstacles, obstructions, and hesitations, and feel that the Goddess breathes them into her own heart, transmuting them into light and freedom. Feel that as you take her light into your body, you are taking in the power to protect yourself and others, speak the truth, and wield strength with love.

Allow this red light to flow through you for a few moments, feeling how it fills you with the goddess's vital force.

Now, imagine yourself drawing the goddess's energy into your own body. You might imagine her in your whole body or sense that her presence takes up residence in the center of your chest, in the region of the heart. Ask that she be present in your heart and that her power, love, and strength flow through you. Thank her for her gifts and blessings.

Notice any feelings or sensations you experience.

Take a few moments to journal about what occurred during this meditation. And notice how the rest of your day unfolds when you have done this practice.

Receiving Guidance

As you sit in meditation, ask a question to the Goddess. If there is a specific issue of concern to you now, ask it in this form: "What wisdom can you give me about this situation?"

Or ask a more general question such as "What can you tell me about my path?"

The best way to do this practice is to write her answers rather than expecting her to "tell" them.

The Protocol: Keeping pen and paper handy, sit in meditation and invoke Durga's presence either as energy in your heart or sitting in front of you. Sit with this for a few minutes. Then, ask the question, and IMMEDIATELY pick up your pen and write without thinking. Let the words flow from your hand. Don't censor.

When you are sure it is finished, read over the words, and if necessary, ask for clarification.

Hint: If this is a "real" message and not your mind talking, it will be fundamentally loving and positive. If it is critical, then it is probably a "message" from your critical inner voice and not from the Goddess!

Durga is the goddess to call on when you need strength to meet your challenges, when you doubt yourself and need to have your confidence restored, when you sense the need for an infusion of vital force, or when you want to be able to act powerfully in a non-egoic way.

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She is also the goddess of protection, so you can invoke her when you are frightened and want to feel protected from fear.

Contemplation for Drawing in Divine Strength

Ask yourself: How do I experience personal strength and courage? Write down whatever arises.

Then, ask the Goddess Durga to breathe her power, courage, and love into your heart. Begin to breathe in with the feeling that you are breathing in her divine presence and breathe it through your body. Use the mantra to invoke the Goddess, or simply address her directly, “Dear Durga, please fill me with your presence in the form of inner strength, courage, and love.”

Notice how invoking the presence of the Goddess Durga shifts your energy. Is it centering? Strengthening? Does it awaken a sense of energy in you? Write down how your sense of your own strength and courage shifts when you feel yourself drawing in the strength of the Goddess.

Contemplation and Partner Practice

Several possible topics are given below. Choose one or several, depending on your time. As you begin the discussion, take a moment to feel into your own heart, to become aware of your partner’s heart. Then imagine the form or energy of Durga behind both of you, ‘feeding’ you wisdom. As you have the discussion, periodically check into your heart and the sense of Durga shakti behind the two of you

Topics for Personal Journaling

Spend half an hour working with the Emotional Freedom practice we did in class. (You’ll find it below). Notice and journal about its effect, and discuss it with your partner

Emotional Freedom Practice based on the Tantric View that Emotions are Shakti

Remember the last time you had a big loss. The loss of a job, the loss of a relationship. The loss of an important document that got erased from your computer by accident. I suggest that you work with a loss that matters to you, but not necessarily one of the very big ones in your life.

Recall the situation and see if you can take yourself into the feeling state around that loss. Make it big in your psyche. Use words to make it bigger and more intense. Words like, “This is so terrible! How could he say that about me? I didn’t deserve this.” Whatever triggers the feeling you want to work with.

Now, drop the story. Ask yourself, “Can I let go of this?” Or breathe it out. Now, as you feel the emotions, notice the sensations around it. Emotion is its own energy vortex, and it has a certain density and dynamism. Where do you feel it in your body? Does it feel hard? Sharp?

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Swampy? Do you feel your energy sinking when you tune into it? Or do you find it activating? Notice if the feeling has a color. Can you tune into the emotion strictly as an energy, with sensations, density, and even color, but no story?

Imagine that there is a space around the energy packet of the emotion. Feel the presence of this energetic space and simply hold the denser and more dramatic energy of the emotion within the container of space. Let your attention flow into the denser emotional energy, then into the space around it. If the emotion feels strong, keep some part of your attention on the space around the energy. That space is made of awareness—of Shakti.

Now, see if you can dive right into the middle of the emotional energy while keeping some sense of space around it.

Now at this point, there are several things you could do. If it's a feeling that you feel its important to understand, you might inquire into it, asking what it has to tell you. Or you could just hold the space around it and notice what happens—which in my life, is usually that the emotion begins to morph and evanesce.

Or you could play with it. since the emotion is actually made of shakti, it can actually energize you as you cultivate the creativity of shakti. So, here is sort of game you can play with it. Imagine that a hand comes into your psychic space and gently squeezes the emotional energy, crunching it into particles. Now fully focus on the space remaining as this emotional energy dissolves. Rest there for a moment. Then imagine that you reconstruct the emotion using the particles of energy in your mind. Bring it back into a prominent place in your awareness.

Feel into it—sensations, colors, place in body. Now, once again, crunch it. notice the space in your inner body that remains.

Can you recognize how fluid the energy within this emotion actually is? How it can morph and change? And how when you work with it as energy, it actually brings you closer and closer to the felt sense of Shakti within it?

Gently bring the mantra into the space where you were experiencing the emotion. Breathing gently, allow the mantra to spread out and fill up your inner space. Sense the throb in the mantra. Rest there.

Other Practices from Weeks 1-3

Choose some 'enlightened thoughts' to experiment with, such as "Everything that arises in my mind and body is Shakti" or "That person is an aspect of my own self" or "Love is present here." Notice the effect of holding such an enlightened thought.

Try replacing critical thoughts with more positive and accepting thoughts like "Everyone is doing their best, including me," or "I accept myself just as I am" or just offer the critical thought to Goddess asking that she free you from it. Journal about this and discuss it with your partner.

What 'signals' from Shakti are you getting this week? What are you doing about them? Contemplate this, journal about it, and discuss with your partner.

Topics for Partner Discussion

Do start by meditating together, and then spend some time discussing your experience of the course, what is happening in your life as you do the practices and anything you want to share about the Navaratri practice or goddess Durga.

How have you been experiencing the mantra this week? That is, do you feel it's bringing up emotions? Purifying you? Settling or calming you? How does it change your state?

NEW: Practice the practice for working with emotions that we did in class together, then discuss it afterwards. Or simply discuss the practice as you experience it.

What forms of resistance or discouragement or dryness have you been experiencing (if any) during the class? Are there beliefs or assumptions behind them? What might they be? Discuss the beliefs and ask yourself "Is this true? Is it really true?" (Shoutout to Byron Katie here!) Can you let go of this belief for now? What arises for you when you do let go? What would your life be like if you didn't have that belief?