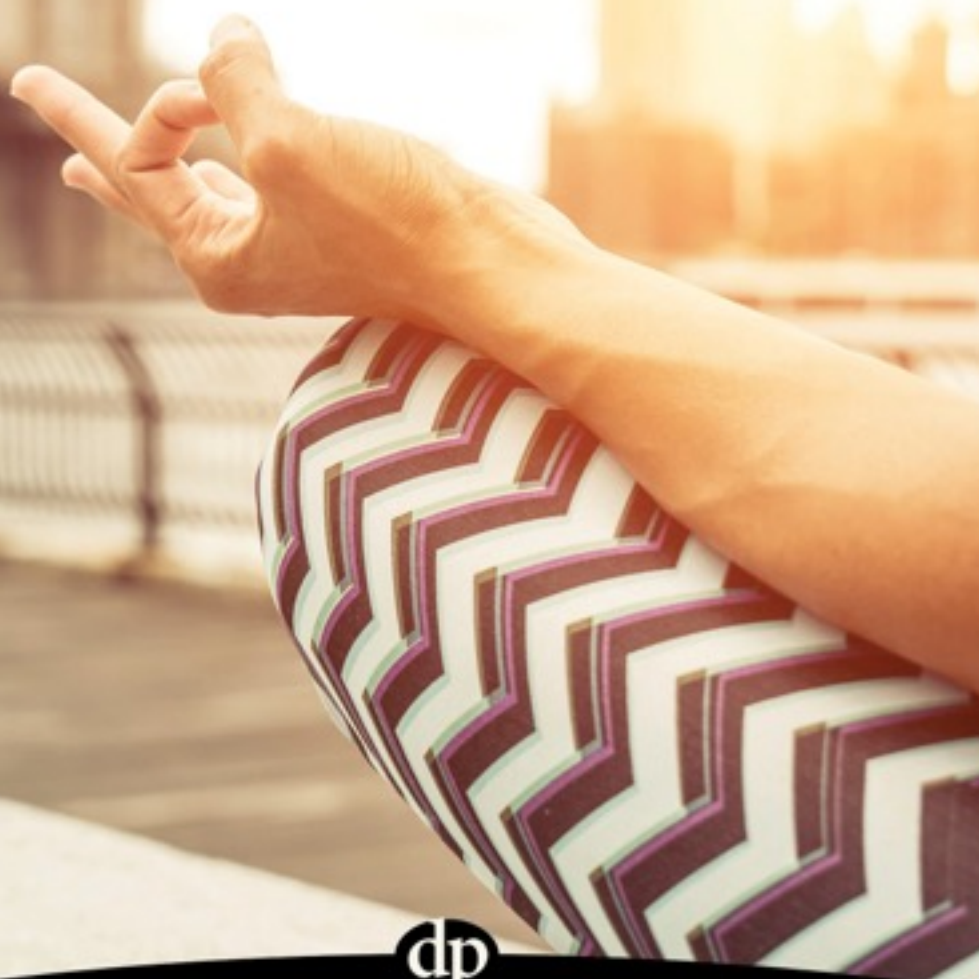


PLEASANCE SILICKI

DELIGHT

**Eight Principles for Living
with Joy and Ease**



dp

Delight

Eight Principles for Living with Joy and Ease

By Pleasance Silicki

Copyright

Difference Press

Washington, DC

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ISBN: 978-1-68309-063-2

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Cover Design: Heidi Miller

Editing: Grace Kerina

Author's photo courtesy of Benjamin Lowengard

Graphic of The Eight Limbs of Yoga courtesy of Alston Taggart, Red Studio

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my roommate for the past sixteen years, Mel Silicki. He has given me incredible support and encouragement through many changes and challenges over our long history together. Our children are so lucky to have this amazing man as a father, and I am so grateful for all the love he has brought to my life.

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Introduction

"We are all just walking each other home."

Ram Dass.

Welcome to delight. Let's step into the journey of our sacred, ordinary lives with joy and ease. This book is an invitation for your body, mind, and spirit to learn principles and practices that you can weave into your life, for the rest of your life. Come in, as you are.

I know you are tired, exhausted, overwhelmed with your life. I know that you are doing so much for so many people, just trying to keep up in the world with everything you "should" be doing. I get it. I was like that too. I wrote this for you, to help ease you out of the stresses of everyday life that have become so draining, so depleting.

I want you to have all the tools you need to find your way home to yourself, to the educated, engaged, and generous person you truly are. You can create boundaries and practices that will nourish your life. They will provide you with strength and flexibility so you can navigate your responsibilities from a place of love and service and in a way that is energizing and sustainable through all the seasons of your life.

I love the term "sati," which translates as "mindfulness" and is used in Buddhism. It comes from words that originally meant "to remember." As you work through the book, I invite you to write "Sati" on a notecard or sticky note and place it as a reminder where you can see it often, like on your phone case. That word, sati, will bring you back, will remind you to remember how you feel when you dive deep, as we will over the next few chapters. Sati will remind you to breathe deeply and to take time to slow down in order to wake up. Use this concept of sati generously throughout your life, as often as you can, to help you integrate your deeper self into daily life. You may not need the full effect of this practice now, but having it might come in handy later in your life.

This book is a modern women's guide to how certain wisdom, traditions, and practices apply and relate to your sacred ordinary life. The life in which you are awake to the small simple interactions and activities which can so easily be passed over, forgotten or ignored. Instead, we

use the term sacred ordinary to explain or dive into how our common lives can be full of wonder.

When people ask you, “How are you?” – instead of the same old, “Crazy busy!” answer, try saying, “Good. I live with joy and ease.” If you don’t see your life that way quite yet, don’t worry. You will. Open your mind and heart and think the mantra, “It’s possible.”

* * *

For years, my life was full of overwhelm and too much responsibility. I didn’t see a way out. I felt trapped by my commitments and choices, drowned in serving and pleasing everyone around me. Barely able to say no, or even to value my own time, I was drained from all of the constant over-giving and over-extending. I had a hard time receiving or asking for help, and would explode in anger regularly when my plate was too full. I did not have the tools or the language to help myself. As each year passed, I became more resentful toward the life I was creating. Exploding in anger, falling apart in tears, ruining relationships were just some of the ways this showed up in my life.

Then, in 2000, I started practicing yoga, and have been obsessed ever since. This practice changed my career path and my relationship to myself, increased my love for my husband and children, and helped to heal a very complicated, painful relationship with my mother.

I hope that what you learn and put into your life as you read this book will also bring you more joy and more light than you have now, in ways that you can not even imagine yet.

I am an active, curious, hungry learner who is constantly amazed by how much this yogic system and approach to living continues to lead me in healthy, healing, interesting, beautiful ways. And I want to share some of this with you. As part of the tradition, we have a responsibility to share techniques that have helped us, so that we help others live more peaceful, loving lives. And now, it’s your turn.

According to a recent *Yoga Journal* study, twenty percent of Americans have practiced yoga. Today, most of what we know about yoga has to do with crazy-difficult poses, Instagram photos, and fitness-inspired yoga workouts. I am here to tell you that the difficulty of your poses has nothing to do with the magic of the yoga. Your mind activity is where the benefits of the practice can be seen. A healthy yoga practice is one in which your mind is free from clutter and strain, clarity dominates, and personal narratives of negative, toxic thoughts rarely pass through – and if they do, they don’t hang around very long.

Learning about, studying, and practicing yoga cracked open my heart, calmed my anxiety, squashed my depression, and enlightened everything about my day to day life, turning tension and anger into ease and kindness. I had always been a seeker, but yoga taught me that I did not always need an answer. I am naturally motivated, ambitious, and energetic. Like you, I have a monkey mind and it was hard to slow down, pay attention, and sit still when I first tried it. I also have a tendency to take on too much and worry about what others think. I have experienced angst about my contribution to the world. I know what it's like to never feel like you're enough.

As I share the principles that I focus on in this book, I will also share stories and practices that you can use on your journey. These principles are applicable to any and all areas of your life. Engaging in a living yoga practice will show you that the main concepts covered cannot be separated or segregated from each other.

Our wholeness comes from seeing our experiences here as interconnected. We can appreciate and surrender to the fact that our family life affects our mental and physical health, and our work life contributes to how we treat our bodies, our selves, and our families. What is happening in nature, in the world, in our city, and in our community also has an effect on our nervous system and our stress levels. It's all connected, we're all connected, and it's all related.

These principles and concepts can help you gain clarity around navigating a life change – a transition, or they might be your access point to a deeper mindfulness practice for your current stage in life. The basic principles we dive into here, and that I teach every day in private and group sessions, are amazingly relevant to all areas of our life.

I hope this book encourages and inspires you to look clearly at your life and to be able to assess what is working and what is not, and to make choices from a stance of empowered strength and flexibility. My yoga teacher always says that yoga is a combination of relaxation, love, and self-trust.

This book is a tool to help you find your way home to yourself. I am on this journey right alongside you. As someone who is passionate about learning, growing, and sharing, I want us to grab hands and – with open eyes, hearts, and curiosity – walk down this path together. Let's explore our inner worlds. Let's talk honestly about our lives and our truths. As sisters, let's hold on to each other as we explore the deep sorrows and incredible, magical joy that comes with

wholehearted living and cultivating more daily delight. Delight is taking great pleasure and I just want *more of this*, for all of us.

Chapter 1 – Aha

“And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.”

Anaïs Nin

What Is Aha?

Aha is the moment our lives change forever. It’s the phone call we pick up, the job we leave, the illness that takes over, the heart that breaks. We have these defining moments in our lives that forever change who we are and what we are here to do. Some of us will listen, some of us will hear what we are being called to do, to be, to explore. And some of us will keep on doing the same thing. An Aha is the point at which we can pivot. It’s the reason you are here.

It has happened to you. You stop and think, is this all there is to my life? There might be shortness of breath or racing thoughts. There might be a pit in your stomach or an ache in your heart. You know something is churning inside you. You question. You feel that something is not quite right. It’s like one day you are on a path to what you *think* will be perfect, which, in turn, will give you joy. You work hard, you do everything you *should* to make a great life. And yet something is not quite right. *Is this really all there is?*

With the demands of your life, you have a hard time actually experiencing joy. Until, one day, you wake up and realize that you don’t have to do it the way you’ve been doing it. The way “they” do it. You don’t have to follow this road. You can get off, take the next exit. You can find a new way of being that will bring out the best in you. You can chart your own course, and you want a life that fulfills you. You deserve nothing less.

Why is Aha Important?

I hope that, in your life, you have had and are having a series of Aha moments strung together along the journey of your life that lead you to a life well-lived. I hope you can learn to recognize the Ahas when they come into your life, and that you can use the principles in this book to explore these crossroads in your life. If you listen to them, your Aha moments will lead you to some interesting places, new opportunities, and unbelievable experiences. If you don’t

listen, you might numb yourself and your life with various supports, just so you can remain upright.

Our inner lives can be rather complicated. They are, at times, places of tremendous pain and suffering layered with love, compassion, and wisdom. It's a lot to try to understand it all, and I know how much easier it can be to just ignore it.

For those of us who are seekers, who want more out of our lives, and who can feel the difference between when we feel alive and in flow and the times when we are depleted, drained, and run down, these principles are for us.

How Do Aha Moments Help You?

When we have these Aha experiences, it's time to make a change. It might be an actual tangible change about where we live or where we work or who we live with, or it quite possibly could be a mental change. Sometimes we sabotage ourselves with blame, fear, or anger that only exists within our own minds. In order to experience delight in our everyday lives, regularly and consistently, we can pause at the moment an uncomfortable feeling arises. The feelings or thoughts that start to seep in that *do not* lead to us being open and present and loving to ourselves or others can be examined and let go.

I read recently that self-care is just self-love. Right now, stop and take a moment to think about the top five things you love most in your life. Mentally clarify them or physically write them down. (Pause.) Did you make the list? Where are you on that list when it comes to engaging with those things? Did you consider to put yourself right up there at the top of the list? Wouldn't it be great to be #1 on your love list?

I hope to help you find your way to the top of your list.

A Personal Aha Story

Like for many thousands of women who read Elizabeth Gilberts' book *Eat, Pray, Love*, it forever changed my life. However, not because I wanted to leave my husband (in my case, my fiancé) or my life or travel the world. It was because I felt like she was whispering to me the whole time I was reading, telling me, "Darling, you can get out. You can make a change." I was

so intrigued by and terrified of those thoughts that started to arise while I continued to read and write in my journal.

While I read the book, I felt like I was *in it*. I was four months away from getting married and I was in a very stressful administrator role at a school in Southeast Washington, DC. I also served on countless boards and worked on initiatives inside and outside the school environment, as well as with other local community organizations. I don't ever remember saying no during that time.

I was 28. I was overscheduled, overworked, and I felt overwhelmed by my life. The mental strain, anguish, and pressure of the day-to-day responsibilities was a lot. Then there was the pressure I put on myself and negative thoughts I said to myself, which were becoming too much. Gilbert's book *cracked my heart open*, and I began to dream, wonder about, and consider that something else might be possible for me. The problem was that I was so overtired and stressed that I did not know where to even begin.

Also during that time, I was falling in love with yoga. Most nights of the week, after I left school, and on both days of the weekends, I would go to a long, luxurious yoga class to unwind from the day. I loved the poses and the teachers, the community, the love, the teachings, the history, and the clarity I felt after class. I became addicted.

After a few years of practicing regularly, I signed up for teacher training, and had a plan to teach in the school where I worked, and to teach a class here and there as a substitute during the summers.

Here's the thing I see when I look back to that time: I was in a lot of pain. I was deeply sad and angered about what I had seen in the schools. There were also some ongoing issues about my own childhood and past that were starting to creep up again, even though I had been in therapy for years.

I had a very tough, thick armor that I wore in my relationships. I was hard on my friends, and I was judgmental of and critical about pretty much everyone around me. I was constantly getting into arguments with people in my life and even on the street. I drove fast and irresponsibly, beeping and cursing and angry. I yelled at people in stores when things didn't go my way, and I erupted in temper tantrums on my fiancé quite regularly.

Outside of school, I drank and smoked too much (yes, alongside my yoga practice) and I was enraged with emotion and blame. I had no connection to my body or to any joy beyond

work and partying. I was chasing a career, a dream, a path that was no longer serving me, but I was terrified to see that. So I held on tighter. I said yes to a few more things and tried to “busy” myself out of the feelings I had. I spend the rest of the time trying to numb the pain.

The yoga classes I went to and that I started teaching were quite physical. They allowed me to quickly notice and access the anger and tension in my body. I cried on my yoga mat a lot during those first few years. At first, without understanding or knowing why. Years later, I still cry on my yoga mat, but now I do it with such gentleness and gratitude that the practice continues to teach, guide, and lead me toward love, light, and kindness to myself and others, even as I weep. I move now toward softening and surrendering to life rather than beating up on life, on myself, and on everyone else. Often, my students cry. “It’s okay,” I tell them. “This is the magic happening. It’s not easy. It’s not simple. But it means you’re starting to open up, to see the truth, however painful or fearful you may be of it.”

When I “met” Elizabeth Gilbert by reading her book, something inside me woke up to “it’s possible.” When I finished the book, I wrote in my journal that “I feel like I’m about to have an adventure of some kind.” I could feel that something was stirring within me, and after that book, that journal entry I knew I would not be able to ignore that the time had come.

I’d had an Aha.

Mind-Body Practice

I’ll share a chant with you as a place to start a practice and invite Aha into your life. This chant is a beautiful reminder and a prayer for our practice of delight and our world. I have it written down and posted in my office and near my bed. I read, chant, and meditate on these words regularly. Doing so often helps to gently guide me into a place of inner strength and purpose. You can also set a reminder on your phone to alert you to regularly say this chant as you are starting to learn and remember the words.

This is the chant: *Lokah Samasta Sukinoh Bhavantu*

It translates from the Sanskrit as “Let the entire world be happy,” and is associated with this prayer: “May all beings everywhere be happy and free. And may the thoughts, words and actions of my own life contribute in some way to that happiness and that freedom.”

* * *

Please note – the practices at the end of all eight chapters are available through my special offer, Daily Delights, which is an eight-day video series to support the practices in this book. Videos of the chant in Chapter 1 and the other Mind-Body practices are available at lilomm.com/book, or you can email me at pleasance@lilomm.com to get them.

Chapter 2 – Acknowledge

“Sensitivity is a sign of life. Better hurt than hardened. I bow to those who keep their hearts open when it is most difficult, those who refuse to keep their armor on any longer than they have to, those who recognize the courage at the heart of vulnerability.”

Jeff Brown

What Is Acknowledgment?

To acknowledge literally means to say that you accept or do not deny the truth or existence of something. This means, in our daily lives, that there might be something we don't *want* to see but we *need* to see. This is where we are, and what we are doing is not totally working for us. Either our minds are running all over the place, or we are not sleeping or eating well or finding time for our own care. We have to start here.

My yoga teacher, Erich Schiffmann often says, “What is the truth here, really?” He encourages us to ask this daily, to be honest as to what our lives are like and what our relationships are like. Is there a low-level anxiety or restlessness that we feel?

We acknowledge that we want to connect, want meaningful lives, and are craving connection, by starting where we are. Do that right now. Breathe in deeply and then breathe out, opening your mouth on the exhale. Repeat this phrase in your head a few times: *Start where I am*. And let the truth come forward. What do you hear? Something you need to do or stop doing? Are you too busy? Too exhausted? Are you feeling joy? Pause and listen to what comes up. Maybe grab a journal and write down in a free -form style whatever you hear from within. Even if you don't understand it. Practice asking and listening, and then step into acknowledging.

Why Is Acknowledging Important?

At this point, by doing some simple breathing and repeating a mantra, you may be able to see a bit more clearly what it is you might need in your life. Is something weighing on you that might mean you need a professional to help guide you through? Do you need deep rest? Do you

need to move your body a bit more? Do you need to have a tough conversation that maybe you have been avoiding?

Acknowledgment is the first step in our sacred awakening process because it guides us toward a stance from which we can start moving into action. Action is key for change and transformation. If we just jump in, without truly opening our eyes to our lives and seeing what is right in front of us, it can be too easy to get sidetracked or to waste time exploring action in areas that will not really serve us on the deepest levels.

After the Aha of noticing an entry point for further investigation, we acknowledge where we really, actually are now.

How Does Acknowledgement Help You?

Acknowledgment is the entry point to our inner world. For me, yoga has become the daily practice that helps me acknowledge my truth, and that enlivens and enriches all areas of my life.

Erich Schiffmann said, “Yoga is the inquiry into truth.” I rely on this thought each day as I navigate and acknowledge what appears. Being curious about truth has moved me through many complicated, difficult decisions and challenges over the past twelve years. Having a personal mission of truth can help you in all areas, from the work you do to the relationships you are in.

Below is a chart of the eight limbs of yoga, a graphic that shows how the areas of yoga (including truth-telling) and life relate, on and off the mat. Integrating the true parts of yourself is a way to infuse your life with calmness and with action that’s right for you.

The Eight-Limbs of Yoga



A Personal Acknowledgment Story

Dr. Christine Carter's book *The Sweet Spot* opens with her admitting that, as much as she loved her work as a happiness expert and parenting and life coach, she felt overwhelmed by her life. In fact, she'd hit a low point where she got sick and went to the emergency room, where and found herself "hoping the doctor would insist she stay the night." She went on to say how embarrassing and painful it was to realize that as a "lifelong perfectionist and overachiever" she needed to get her "groove back" and get off the "hamster wheel of busyness."

I found myself reading, nodding, and crying as I recognized myself in her words. I know that so many of us are finding ourselves in that same place. We are in over our heads with everything we do, the people we love to help, and the way we say yes to others before saying yes to ourselves.

I read that hospital fantasy in Carter's book and immediately felt and knew that, oh wow, that was me. I felt like Dr. Carter was living in my head. How could I love something I do so much and yet, at the same time, want to hide away so I wouldn't have to deal with it? I teach *truth* for a living! That was the moment I acknowledged that owning a yoga studio was probably no longer a good fit for me. I paused in my reading and felt the butterflies in my tummy, felt the truth percolate in my body and knew that was trying to tell me something.

Many of us live in worlds that we created, that we dreamed of, went to school for, and now feel guilty and fearful about, because we're wondering... *Is this all? What have I done?*

The untangling of it all – all the various things we may not actually want – feels way more intense, embarrassing, and difficult than we imagined, especially if we're acknowledging a failing marriage or a bad job. We cannot even fathom doing the hard stuff to get out of the thing that is causing this pain, suffering, and dis-ease. We can't imagine looking at our lives and accepting them as they are, accepting our lives and our selves wholeheartedly as being perfectly imperfect.

What would it be like to feel whole and loved and understood in our daily lives? Dr. Carter told me something I needed to hear. Do you know what I did then? *Nothing*. I paused. And then I just went on living my life. I had a strong sense that it was not time to uproot my life, to change my life in such a dramatic way. I knew that something would happen and I would have to make a tough decision but the time had not come quite yet. I was still paying affordable rent, growing the studio, and generally things were running smoothly. I acknowledged the thoughts that came in, the feelings that had come up, but I knew it was not the right time for action. But I also knew I was on to something big.

Mind-Body Practice

Take a deep breath. Place your feet on the floor, press into them fully. Balance the weight on the feet front back, side to side and find center. Lengthen your spine. Feel your breath fill up and then leave your torso. Know that you are loved and supported. Know that this road, your journey, will be full of both challenges and delights.

Part of our common human experience is experiencing all the beauty and all the sorrow life brings us. Start inviting more truth into your life right now by acknowledging where you are

in this moment. *Right now*. What are the sounds around you? What is your heart calling for?
What part of your life needs a more love?

Ground yourself and then focus on this mantra: "I acknowledge the truth of where I am.
I will start here."

Chapter 3 – Alignment

“Learn to stand on your feet before you stand on your head.”

A.G. Mohan

What Is Alignment?

One of the reasons we feel disconnected is because many of us have not slowed down enough or taken the time to contemplate our lives in terms of living in alignment. “Alignment” is “being in correct or appropriate relative positions.” “Alignment” is the word I use to replace the outdated and never attainable word “balance.”

If we look at our work responsibilities, our relationships, our lives, the way in which we align, or don’t, is how we live. And when we are out of alignment, that’s when mental chaos and physical pain can appear. It’s when we do too much or try too hard in a way that is not appropriate for where we truly are or who we truly are. And there is so little delight when we are running from one thing to the next, especially to please someone else.

In yogic tradition, we align our lives by diving into the teachings around self-study and discipline in physical practice. When we engage in self-study in relation to a consistent movement and meditation practice, we are more likely to see the areas where we are vulnerable and weak, as well as areas where we are strong and flexible. So when we begin to see how our lives might align, it’s important to cultivate some type of physical yoga practice (even if small!) and meditation practice.

Why Is Living in Alignment Important?

Our yoga practice is a direct mirror for our lives. We can pay attention to what is hurting us and what is helping us. These two areas compliment one another when we are exploring alignment in our lives.

Try this... Stand up. Go up on to your tippy-toes. Lift your heels. Breathe and balance. Pay attention to what happens in your mind when you fall out of a balancing pose. Are you able to be compassionate and loving toward yourself? Or are you critical and judgmental? The learning here is actually in what happens in the mind when we fall out of balance. Alignment is

not about the balance or the pose or the perfection, but about what happens in your mind. Can we fall with kindness? Can you wobble with curiosity and generosity for yourself? What are the messages you're sending yourself?

When you live in alignment, many areas of life become easier. Cultivating ease in our lives, our bodies, and our relationships is a path to freedom and joy.

Notice if you have practicing strain, struggle of some kind, or negativity in your life? We all know someone (or have been that someone!) who has a hard time making decisions or who overcommits. When we bring alignment practices to the forefront of daily life, we have a much easier time making decisions and saying no – because we do so from a place of inner strength, authentic knowing, and *being* in our lives. We are human *beings*, not human *doings*. So *be*, then do.

How Can Alignment Help You?

How we spend our days is how we spend our lives. What do you value? Let's take ten minutes to dig deep. Pause right now and make a list of all the people you truly adore in your life. Hold that feeling and that space for a moment. Breathe and thank and love up those people.

Now turn the paper over and write out a typical day in your life from morning to night. Try not to overthink it – just let it freely flow. On a third sheet, write out what you value most in life. What are the traits, characteristics, and values you hold in the highest regard? You might value community, financial freedom, connection, generosity, learning, health, kindness, spiritual connection, love, education, success, or family. Again, try not to overthink this. Just be open and allow yourself to free-flow write a bit and see what comes up. Keep asking yourself the question, "What do I value?" Once you have 5-7 things listed, you can stop.

Take a few minutes to compare your typical day with your values list. What do you notice? What are some things that you hold closest to your heart that appear in your typical day? How can you intentionally align your life, your precious people, and your values?

With all of this information, create a new schedule of daily activities that is aligned with your values. If you want help with this, email me at pleasance@lilomm.com and we can set up a time to talk.

Okay, now we are ready to see how this can change some of the patterns and habits that may be contributing to some of our dis-ease. Now that we have a sense of alignment and values we can actively engage in our lives from a place of knowing what is deeply important.

If you take that list of values you created and make a creative art project with them or print them out and make some photocopies or print them on pens, water bottles – whatever, then you will have reminders of them in your life. What are some creative ways you can think of to *remind* yourself daily of your values? This will help you make choices that are more aligned with who you truly are.

I am cheap, so I just wrote mine on sticky notes and put them everywhere! In my car, on my bathroom mirror. I blew up the font size and printed them on paper and made a poster of them.

I had to train my brain to remember my values when I was organizing my schedule and my life. I use this list to make decisions, create new projects, commit to or walk away from something. These values helped me craft and create my own personal mission statement, by which I live. As long as I keep aligning my decisions and actions with my values, I find more joy and ease in my daily life. As soon as I start to feel constricted, I know it's time to do an alignment check-in, to do a grounding practice and a balancing practice and listen for what comes up.

A Personal Alignment Story

Creating my values helped me hire employees for my studio, communicate with students who had issues or requests, communicate clearly what my top priorities were for the business, and keep us all on the same page.

One of my core values is generosity. This appears in my life daily in how I interact with others, how I answer emails and phone calls, and how I love to help others. When I realized that generosity was one of the most important values to me, I started enjoying generous acts a bit more, because they're were totally aligned with who I am.

I also know that in order to thrive, I have to honor my own sacred, quiet down time. This helps me cultivate a sustainable state of generosity. When I am in a mental or physical crisis, I find that helping others and being generous makes my heart feel tight, squeezed, and anxious.

To have space to be generous, I have to take the best care of me. I want to be around in this world to help people for a very long time, so and sometimes I allow my generosity to be directed at myself, starting with noticing when I am in need. So for me, I have to remember to take walks in the woods regularly, sit quietly throughout the day, read inspiring books, get up early to have alone, quiet, me- time. All of these daily practices help me align most authentically with my generous spirit. Because I am nourished, I am in a place to help others.

Another one of my values is to keep learning. I am super clear about how I want to spend my money and time around this value. I know that if I am not in learning mode, or studying with a teacher, I find myself feeling lost and without direction. As a lifelong learner, I honor the truth that I need to find retreats and workshops to attend, visit libraries and bookstores, and surround myself with innovative ideas across a variety of topics.

If I get into a rut where I watch too many shows on Netflix that I am not learning anything from, I can feel myself going numb, getting depressed, and living with low-level boredom. That does not mean I don't watch a show once in a while, or engage in things purely for pleasure – but I know that for me to be in flow and feel *good*, I need to be in learning mode. My value to “keep learning” is a reminder me that this a top priority for my well-being and alignment. For me to feel more joy and ease in my body and my life and to truly feel the delight flowing through, I live most days with my personal core values at the top of the to-do list.

Mind-Body Practice

Let's start here with a simple breathing exercise. Do this practice while seated, with your spine aligned and upright, or while standing. If you are standing, press into your feet into the floor and shift your weight a bit to feel your skeleton align.

Breathe in to a count of four.

Hold for a count of four.

Exhale count of four.

Pause to a count of four.

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

Once a four-count feels attainable, extend your count to five for a few rounds. You can work your way up to a count of eight. Take your time.

Use this practice daily to align your breath. Feel that equanimity in your body. Meditate on your core values. Let them live and breathe through you as you engage in the world.

Chapter 4 – Ahimsa

“We are what our thoughts have made us; so take care about what you think.”

Swami Vivekananda

What is Ahimsa?

Ahimsa is the beloved first teaching in the eight limbs of yoga from the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. The foundation for a yoga practice begins with recommendations about things we should abstain from, and the observances through which we practice in our daily lives.

“Ahimsa” is translated as “not causing pain.” Sometimes, this is talked about in terms of eating a vegetarian diet. But there’s another side that directly relates to our daily life: how we treat ourselves, what our thought patterns are, and how kind and loving we truly are in our personal narrative, each day.

One of the later limbs of yoga talks about the important of self-study. One aspect of what yogis do on their journey and in their practice is reflect. In yoga, we believe this self-awareness helps us live with less suffering.

Yoga, in its essence, is a guide for personal transformation. It is a series of techniques and tools that we can use to access our true nature, our most evolved self, our most loving self.

It helps me to think about the relationship between ahimsa and self- study. When I am being truthful about my experience, I am much more likely to see clearly the repeating thought patterns that are not helpful or healthy.

Some teachers talk about ahimsa as the mental health aspect of yoga. What are your thoughts each day? Are they gentle and not causing harm or pain? Because, the truth is, sometimes our personal narratives and repetitive thoughts are barriers to true wellness. But we are only doing this to ourselves. So examining the areas of our lives and being super honest about what’s going on inside our minds, is ahimsa. Let’s pay attention to what we tell ourselves, and begin to change any repeating negative, unhelpful thoughts.

Why Is Ahimsa Important?

Paying attention to our thoughts, patterns, and habits is a true gift that yoga can bring us. When we begin to pay attention and we notice when we are in a habit or routine that doesn't serve us, then we can begin the work to make a different choice, pivot, change, or gain clarity and strength about a different perspective.

Ahimsa is the ultimate self-care. It's easy to make it look like everything is just fine and "all good" if our lives are seen from the outside, because the truth is that only you will ever be the one to know what is going on in there, in your mind. For many of my yoga students, this is a very painful moment of realization for them. It unleashes the fact that they were not even aware of their thoughts, their self-inflicted damage; not aware of the never good enough, fast enough, thin enough, nice enough critics who were living in their minds and directing their whole lives.

Do you hear that nag talking to you when you wake up, listing all the things you need to *do*? Does she tell you your work is not enough or your cooking or cleaning is not enough or that you don't have it together "like everyone else you know." This never-satiated cycle often fills our heads with a million shoulds, coulds, and woulds before 9 a.m.

When we practice Ahimsa, self-compassion and self-love become the anchor, the grounding, and the keys to freedom. Use your practice of delight to put an end to the damaging or negative thoughts your mind has been telling you, and to increase its kind, thoughtful, gentle, loving responses as a way to nourish and nurture you. You deserve it.

How Does Ahimsa Help You?

At this point, we have been diving into acknowledgment and alignment as a foundation for where we are and what we want. We have been tapping into the realities of our experience and then aligning our values to our daily lives. And now that we have that information accessible to us, we can start to pay attention to and open up to any of the ways we might be harming ourselves or not working with our thoughts to create and live and enjoy our lives.

Let's embrace the totality of who we are. That means that there will be days when it's hard to stay confident and clear about what we want; there will be seasons of our lives that are so very busy and stressful.

Taking good care of our thoughts with our “self -love as self- care” motto is essential to this work. We can find ways to connect to our deepest desires and investigate self-care practices that will truly nourish our souls. Ahimsa practices help us in this system by utilizing what we have already learned and showing us when we need to be kind to ourselves. In order for us to get through tough times, we need to be on our own side.

The process of examining our inner lives through this lens of ahimsa allows us to see if we are able to take on a new project from a well-rested, engaged place, or if we are adding things to a list that is already too big, too much, and out of alignment with our values.

Let’s consider self care practices that are all about approaching our lives with kindness and gentle inquiry. In order to be in line with these practices, we cultivate the habit of allowing ourselves space, freedom, and quiet time alone.

With a little space and intentionality infused into our daily lives, we are able to pay attention to and then let go of the thoughts that are not helpful to our journeys. And this is non-harming. By starting with ourselves and our thoughts, we are able to spread more kindness in the world from a place of inner abundance, because we truly experience it ourselves.

Imagine if all the women we knew started being kinder to themselves with their thoughts, started embracing their own deepest desires and dreams as real possibilities, and became their own best friends.

A Personal Ahimsa Story

When I was seven months pregnant with my second child, I lost the lease on my yoga studio. I full-on panicked and actively started searching for a new space. I was able to find one that we could move to and – as overwhelming as it would be – I would be able to move the yoga studio in less than six months to a better location. My son was born shortly after I learned of the necessary but untimely move.

I also had a three-year-old daughter at the time, and I felt that in the day to day, I could handle everything and anything. I felt like Super Woman. There I was, doing what I loved – building up a yoga studio, taking care of my two kids, and being everything to everyone. I was running on adrenaline.

The thought *I can do this* became the mantra I used regularly. My son was a very demanding eater and would not take a bottle, so we were together 24/7. I hired a business coach to help me with the yoga studio transition. I spent many nights in tense arguments with my husband around finances, and found myself blaming him for everything negative that was happening in our marriage.

Somewhere between child one and child two, studio location one and studio location two, I lost my sense of who I was and what I wanted. I lost my connection to the voice within. In fact, I think I was just telling her to be quiet while I ran the show. *Everyone else has two kids and a job and a marriage. They can do it. So can I.* That was all I heard. And the more other people told me, "I don't know how you do it," the more I took on, the more I had to prove to the world that I was enough. That I was successful. No matter what.

With that family, work, and financial dynamic, I spent no time alone. When I was journaling, it was mostly angry and bitter. I was leaking energy all over the place.

A few months later, after things had smoothed out a bit in our new studio space, and I had planted my feet a bit more with this second kid thing, I finally went to get my hair cut. My stylist looked at me and asked, "Do you know about this? There are bald spots back here." I felt like I had been punched in the stomach. I freaked out as she found bald spots scattered all over my scalp.

How had I not noticed that? I was so mad at myself for not paying attention to the disappearing hair and to the massive bald spots. I quickly went to the doctor, and they were not sure if all of it would fall out or if the loss would just stop at some point. Some hair loss is common with postpartum women, but this was a severe case that "might be an autoimmune disease or leukemia." Ugh, okay. For the next six months, we watched carefully as I continued to lose my hair, and I actively hid the issue from as many people as possible. I went weekly to get injections in my scalp to stimulate growth, not knowing if it would help.

And that was when I realized I had not been taking care of myself. Although the hair loss was a delayed reaction to the incredible stress I had faced for months in my personal and professional life, my body was responding, calling out for help, for attention. My thought patterns and intense pushing through during that difficult time had led me to total depletion. I was drowning. Like many women before me, it was a health crisis that woke me up.

It's only now, years later, that I truly have compassion for that sweet new mama who was lost and scared and desperately trying to hold on to everything for everyone. The months I faced the hair loss and the unknowns about it were a full-on internal battle over why and how it could happen. I kept blaming myself for being a yoga teacher, a wellness teacher, and a health coach – who obviously was not healthy! (That is what I told myself.) I experienced deep inner conflict around how people perceived me, and what the contrasting truth was. Then I would beat myself up around the feelings that came up, repeating things to myself like, "It could be worse. You have so much. You are ungrateful. You are selfish to even care about your hair..." on and on and on. I was harming myself daily with these stories.

I hope this story inspires you to stop right now and just be honest with yourself about any thoughts you might have that are harming you. In order for us to open our hearts and expand our well-being beyond what we know to be possible for ourselves, we put an end to any thoughts that cause pain. It's time to find some space between painful thoughts and treat yourself with utmost care and respect.

In studying the wisdom traditions, we learn that human beings have, for hundreds of years, engaged in deep personal reflection, walked in nature, done meditation and yoga. I think having a calming practice is the ultimate gift you can give those around you. Then you can be around for a long time to do all the things you want to do in this world.

Mind-Body Practice

When you wake up tomorrow or go to sleep tonight, try out this little practice.

Place your hands on your heart, one on top of the other, with your palms down. Press your hands firmly into one another and against your chest. Feel the warmth in your hands in your heart center. Think to yourself:

- May I be happy.
- May I be safe.
- May I be healthy.
- May I live with ease.

Do this as a way to honor where you are, right now in this moment. Do this as a way to practice self care on a deeper level, and to cultivate healthy, positive thoughts.

Chapter 5 – Attention

“Ehipassiko! Come & see for yourself.”

Buddhist teaching

What is Attention?

And now begins our exploration of the most incredible shift that can occur in your life. It's giving the gift of attention to your life. To right now, this moment. This is all you have, truly. Attention is when we take notice of someone or something as interesting or important. There is nothing more interesting or important than your life.

We often live in our minds – in the past with thoughts and conversations that already occurred, or in the future – worrying and stressing about something that may or many not happen. But the truth is, all we have is this moment. At any moment, the phone could ring or the email could come in that changes everything. And at some point, this happens to us all.

But attention is only this right here. This breath. This day. This sensation.

Our yoga practices guide us to open our eyes, our hearts, and our minds to the fact that noticing and being curious about our life is life. It's the purest form of love to just be present, to show your interest in your life and in others.

So, let's start right now. Cultivate an attention practice. Commit to noticing the sights, smells, sensations, feelings, and noises around you right now, in this moment. Pay attention.

Why Is Attention Important?

The good news is that we live in a time where paying attention is the cool thing to do. It's trendy to be mindful. I have seen books, articles, podcasts, and talks about this all over the place. We learn that paying attention can bring us more joy, money, energy, love, patience, and better health. Yes, please!

There are really no downsides to having an attention practice. In fact, what I love the most about this practice is that you can do it all the time, anywhere, while doing anything. Paying attention to our here and now does really cool things to our brains and strengthens our

immune systems. It also gives us the incredible superpowers of focus, action, and follow-through. Whoa.

We all want to do more in our lives. We want to be engaged and involved with our responsibilities and our communities and our families... but being pulled in every direction all the time has put real damage on our nervous systems. Paying attention brings us back and helps us prioritize. It brings us home.

How Does Attention Help You?

Our attention practice directly feeds into creating a daily gratitude practice. There are gobs of awesome research out there about how gratitude practices change lives. Gratitude is a natural state, as is love. The yogis believe that we all are naturally loving, caring, engaged, grateful beings, and that challenges, pain, fear, and heartache from this life (or past lives) are what cause us to become hard, angry, tense, sick, and mean. Fearing the loss of things we love, forming attachments to how we want things to be, and facing our own mortality are the main reasons we suffer.

When we pay attention to this moment and slow down to see the beauty that *already* exists in our lives, we are able to zoom out enough to make space for the incredible gifts that our lives are. We often began to realize then that we have enough. We are enough.

If you are reading this book, you are incredibly privileged. You know that. So what happens to us when we are angry because we're doing the dishes *again*, or we're waiting in line at the grocery store and we become frustrated or angry or irritated or bored with life? We have zoned out. We have moved away from our bodies. We have allowed our minds to wander off into another realm. This does not mean we will not feel anger or frustration or other intense emotions, it just means that when they do occur, we can identify them, we can work *with* them and navigate our lives from this place of awareness. When we are living in our heads we tend to ruminate, replay episodes from the past or worry about the future. When we live in our hearts/our bodies we feel the emotions as they enter, we can identify them and give them a little bit of air, breathing room, so maybe they won't be as intense. This process takes time to cultivate but you have to pay attention. We know the feeling when our whole body is alive, engaged, and breathing – we know how good that feels.

We can commit to using our awareness of ordinary moments of being zoned out or frustrated or scared as a pathway to inner peace. We can commit to shifting our attention.

It's easy to be grateful for our kiddos when they show compassion, are sleeping, and are doing things we are proud of. It's a whole other story when they are having a tantrum, had another bed-wetting middle of the night, or acted up in public. We can use our everyday lives as a way to practice the art of paying attention so that we regularly and consistently have a gratitude practice in all of the seemingly not so gorgeous parts of our lives. This means we dive deep into our hearts and our practice when we come across an unpleasant person, have a long line at the post office, or are on a long hold for customer service. We look for ordinary places in our lives to infuse with kindness, appreciation, and compassion for what we do have. This includes food, loved ones, comfy homes and beds, cars and phones.

Zoom out and be grateful.

Let's be real. *This is hard work*. Trust me, when my dog is barking and my kids are yelling for dinner and the water is boiling, it's *not* always easy to be grateful! But, after so many years of practice I will say that I have more calm peaceful moments than I did 5 years ago. And not as many heated moments, for me, that's a relief. I never feel good when I yell at the kids or my husband. Many of us have been practicing getting lost in our thoughts for most of our life. So taking back the reins takes time. We won't always be able to catch our breath, slow it down, or notice the good. We *all* have moments where we lose it in one way or another. But with attention, that can shift.

Our attention practice is about doing more of what, ultimately, feels good. That's all. Just wake up to what you normally do and then try a new way that feels better. Most likely, you will feel more spacious when you are patient, calm, and present during a tough situation than when you yell, throw a tantrum, shove emotions down, or storm away.

A Personal Attention Story

As I sit here and write, it's freezing cold outside. I had to put on my coziest socks and grab the softest blanket before I sat down. There is silence in my home, but when I listen a bit more closely, I can hear the heater purring at me and the birds outside asking for spring. A car drives down my street and my hands feel cool as I type on my computer. I pause again and feel

the comfort of my home. I take a deep breath, aware of the fact that sharing all of these sacred practices with you fills my heart with an exploding joy that this might help you be able to live a more empowered and embodied life by practicing in super simple ways.

The shift from rushing and racing and pushing to noticing and paying attention has transformed my mind so much over the years that I now devote my life to sharing the teachings around how to be more curious in our experiences so we can make our lives more meaningful.

I remember the first time I heard a yoga teacher ask me, “What would happen if, when you do the dishes, you actually stayed in the moment and did the dishes with your full attention?” She told me to watch my mind and notice when I was drifting away from the experience of doing the dishes. She encouraged me to shift my attention to the actual task at hand, rather than going backward or forward in time in my mind.

I went home that night and did what she said. It was incredible! When I actually paid attention and felt the water, and the soap, and intentionally experienced washing the dishes as meditation, I felt strong and centered and calm. I could not stop talking about! I told everyone in my circle of friends. I asked them, “Have you ever really just done the dishes and been totally present?” I was 22 years old and I know they thought I was crazy!

That was one of the experiences early on that made me keep wanting more. It seemed like every time I heard and implemented a teaching around paying attention to the present moment, my perspective changed, and the filters through which I saw life got clearer. I felt myself returning home to a sense of self and comfort and ease that I had not experienced before.

I don't know that I will ever fully understand why this technique works so well, but I speak from the most authentic and heartfelt place when I ask you to try it. Decide that today you will do your household chores and tasks with the intention of being fully present. What does it feel like in your body to take a shower? To wipe the kitchen counter? To walk the dog or check your email? What do you hear? What do you notice around you? What happens if you don't let your mind wander away? What happens if you encourage your thoughts to stay and play with your life, to live here and now with you?

Mind-Body Practice

Right where you are right now, plant your feet into the ground or earth or floor.

When I feel disconnected from my life or my body I take off my shoes and go walk in the grass in my backyard.

Get grounded. Stand tall or sit rooted, and feel. Listen. Take it all in.

The next time you do anything, use it to integrate your attention practice. You can do this with driving, running, showering, typing, reading, walking, waiting... you name it.

What senses did you tap into? What do you hear? Smell? Taste? See? Feel?

Email me at pleasance@lilomm.com and let me know what happened for you, what was your experience like? I can't wait to hear that ways your attention practice shows up in your life.

Chapter 6 – Ask

“Courage doesn’t happen when you have all the answers. It happens when you are ready to face the questions you have been avoiding your whole life.”

Shannon L. Alder

What Does Ask Mean?

Are you ready to go deeper? It’s time to face some uncomfortable stuff and use what we discover to help us make some decisions and gain some clarity around our lives.

Asking means that we engage in a self-reflective process regularly, asking ourselves things like:

- What is working in my life?
- What needs to be adjusted?
- Am I taking good care of myself?
- Have I gotten distracted in my life in a way that has led me away from my core values?
- What practices are working for me and make me feel good?

The key to this type of inquiry is *not* that there actually is an answer. Sometimes we pose questions that have no answer, right now or ever. Some questions just make us pause and ponder. If you are someone (like me!) who loves an answer, a knowing, a way, a plan, then this practice can be rather challenging. But asking is the way to hear your soul’s song.

When I talk about asking here, I’m referring to asking the universe, the divine, your inner teacher, your subconscious, your true nature, God, Jesus, Buddha, whatever you call it. Contemplation with the intention of expanding your current state of being is a yogic teaching that is essential to this type of transformation.

Why Is Asking Important?

Many of us struggle to hear what our souls are trying to tell us, because of the fast-paced nature of our lives. And sometimes we don't want to hear what it is trying to tell us. Sometimes, the deep layers of *why* we do what we do are so painful that we are not ready to face them. We have to move gently, gracefully, kindly, in that case.

Many of us have buried our emotions about our childhoods, our relationships, and our addictions. If this is the case, it can always be helpful to work with a mental health professional. But some of us have done years of therapy and still see patterns and habits showing up that are related to our pasts. We can reach out to healers, helpers, and teachers who are more spiritually inclined, and ask them to help us. Look around for who appeals to you as a helper. There are reiki practitioners, acupuncturists, shamans, meditation teachers, energy healers, and others, depending on where you live and what you have access to.

If you know you need help, but are not sure what you need, ask around. Post on Facebook. Look for a naturopath or an integrative health doctor in your area who can refer you.

Interview your healers and helpers before you commit to them. There are a lot of people in this work who won't be a good fit for you. The only way to know is to communicate with them and see how it feels. Some people might creep you out and some people might feel like you have known them for years. Sometimes you might feel neutral, which usually means you are not ready to work with them and you need more time.

If the name, person, or treatment keeps coming up in your thoughts, then pay attention. Maybe it's time to hire them. It's good to work with healers, helpers, and teachers who *have* teachers themselves. That's usually where I start when I'm looking to study with someone or get a treatment from someone. I trust and like to work with people who have been through some kind of transformation, who understand the process.

I listen to recommendations that come my way and keep a list of those people, in case I ever need to reach out. I get involved, through questioning and tuning in to my own well-being. I take control of who I work with, why I work with them, and when.

How Does Asking Help You?

This process of asking will deeply impact your role in your healing. When I go to a therapist, I make it clear what my goals are and how many sessions I would like to work

together. For example, I might say, “I am coming here to get help with my marriage issues that are repeating. Here are three examples from my journal this week. I would like to address them and to get some strategies about this in three sessions.” When I do this, I not only save time and money but – because of all the other work I have done regularly – I am able to come in clear, strong, articulate, specific, and focused. We can get right to the heart of the work that needs to be done, because I have put in the time to allow, align, and ask. When I hit a bump, I can easily get the help I need in that area. And then move on.

I have also noticed over the years that, as a result of being clear about what I need, I no longer have to rely on the therapist to solve the problem. With the tools I have and the regular questioning I do, I can make progress on my own. “Am I relating with my husband on an energy level? Am I contributing to the tension in our relationship?” I am able to clearly identify when I get off track or when I have been negligent of our marriage, and then I am able to quickly shift my energy to a healthier mindset.

A few years ago, one of my friends, Michelle Brady, taught me the acronym BRAIN as a reminder of a way to assess what to do when problems arise in life. BRAIN stands for:

- Benefit – What is the benefit of this in my life? In my work? In my family?
- Risk – What is the risk I assume if I do this? In my family? In my work in my life?
- Alternative – What alternates are out there? Are there any?
- Intuition – What does my gut, my inner teacher tell me about this?
- Nothing –What if I do nothing? Are there any consequences? How will this feel?

Michelle is a doula and learned this acronym and technique as a way to support women in labor and when making choices around birth. She shared it with me in regard to teaching prenatal yoga students, but I immediately thought, *Whoa. What if I actually used this in my life, as a guide?*

I quickly typed it out, blew up the font, and posted it next to my office computer. Now I regularly use the BRAIN system. I can go down the list and quickly decide whether or what action needs to be taken, or if I need to wait a bit longer. For me, it works every time. And the whole idea around the “action” of “do nothing” is totally enlightening for someone like me who

moves quickly and tends to take quick action. Sometimes “nothing” is exactly what needs to be done.

Here’s a Story About Asking

In the early fall of 2014, I was totally wiped out. I was running the yoga studio, parenting my two little kids, and was the co-founder of the National Kids Yoga Conference. It was just a few weeks before our first conference. Between the rush of school starting, the seasonal transitions which I never remembered to schedule myself time to adjust to, the fall frenzy, and the conference, I was feeling totally *done* with life.

Although I told myself I should have been working, I spent many afternoons in bed crying. I was so confused as to *why* it was happening. I loved my yoga studio, I loved creating new awesome communities like the one that was forming around the conference. I loved my children. I had addressed some tough issues in my marriage, but was feeling good about the direction we were going. There was no *reason* for me to be in bed or weepy.

After a few weeks of that, I started asking. I first asked around to my friends: “Does anyone know someone who does energy work who can help me lift this heaviness?” I scheduled an appointment with my naturopath for some blood work, convinced my hormones were out of whack. I scheduled an appointment with an acupuncturist, telling her I was exhausted and overwhelmed with life. When those two appointments did not seem to help, and the results came back that my hormones were fine, but I did have adrenal fatigue, I called a local shaman that a friend had referred. The shaman called me back to see if we would be a good fit, and it turned out we were.

I went in later that week to see the shaman, but I had no idea what to expect. My yoga practice had expanded my capacity for love in ways I had not felt in my body before. The yogic teachings, along with the movement practice, had been just what I’d needed to start unraveling. However, once my passion became my business and I had the yoga studio, I no longer regularly experienced the same quality of release. Part of my practice back then was to continue to find new ways to learn about myself and my body, but I was doing that even as more and more parts of my life became integrated and tied into bills, teachers, rents, students, and stress.

Lying on the mat with the shaman, Beatrice, was one of the scariest places I had ever been. Mainly because I could feel her in my mind. I could hear the drumming, and I felt the pulsations and sensations in my body. We went on a journey together. When we came out, I was shaking. During our journey, I experienced a deep release and an emotional healing that that no words can really describe. At one point, I was sobbing in every part of my body. My whole body was breathing the cries. Pain and suffering moved through me like wild animals, like they were alive.

After our session, we talked. We began to get into what my life was like. How busy. How full. How much I was committed to doing everything for everyone. We dug into the guilt that was resting just under the surface. I identified the thought “you know better,” which made me feel as if I was not even allowing myself to make mistakes or feel run down, because I should be handling it all better; because yoga teachers *teach* this.

As we continued to talk and get to the root of the energy around my habit of overachieving, we came to a very simple yet very profound question. Beatrice asked me, “What are you trying to prove?” The answer was that all I had ever been trying to do in my life was prove to the world that I was not my mother. My mother experienced addiction, abuse, mental illness, pain, and suffering. She is a kind hearted person who has lost her way many times in her life. At times, she has been totally alone in the world, living in a shelter, going to rehab, not able to connect with anyone.

However, at the time of that shamanic healing, my mother was sober and back in my life in a healthier way than she had been in the past. That was the moment of truth. If my mother was doing well, was steady and stable and had a job, a husband, and a simple yet good life, then what was I doing running around trying to be everything to everyone to prove that I wasn’t her?

The paradigm, the proving, the more-than-enough overwhelm was not going to work anymore after that, because the truth was that things had changed. I could either let go – internally and externally – of the roles and responsibilities that were not serving me anymore, that were causing tremendous dis-ease, or I could leave them and walk away. I could say goodbye to the woman I was who had to do, do, do, and step into the women who chose to *be*. The woman who chooses life and energy and breath and space. And that’s what I did.

That resolution and transformation began with me asking questions and asking for help to understand more about myself and the cycles and patterns that continued to emerge and affect my life.

As I remained devoted to my practice, I had to change some of the ways I gained entry to my inner life. In the early days of practicing yoga, I was able to start peeling back the layers of my trauma and healing, through yoga classes and meditation, but the longer I practiced, the more I began to see that I also needed to change modalities. I needed to evolve my practices and my approaches as my heart and life expanded and I became more open and sensitive to the world. I needed to evolve what I was asking and who I asked.

Mind-Body Practice

Lie down on your back on the floor and get comfortable. Take a few deep breaths. Bend your knees and place your feet on the floor. Turn your palms up. Breathe into your palms. Feel the sensations in your hands. Press down into your feet to activate the inner arches and the energy lines that go up your legs. Spend five to 20 minutes there just breathing.

This is called the Conscious Listening Pose. It's a way to practice listening to your life, your internal world, your thoughts, the universe. If you practice this pose regularly, it can be a wonderful tool for helping you face tough decisions, and when your life seems to be running away from you. Come back here, lie down, and breathe. Palms up. Just listen.

Chapter 7 – Activate

“Be the place where love flows through because it’s good for others and it’s good for you.”

Erich Schiffmann

What Is Activation?

“To activate” means “to set something into motion.” This is the *key* element of the yogic methodology for living a life in contentment, fulfillment, and with purpose. In other, more thought-based approaches, like coaching, therapy, healing, and holistic counseling (which can all do a fabulous job to support our lives), there is usually not a movement component. However, without an actual somatic (movement) practice, I find that most people will not make the changes necessary for deep transformation and integration towards joy and ease.

Why Is Activating Important?

We want to be free of the emotional baggage and burdens that prevent us from being ourselves. However, we mostly don’t have the tools to actually move these energies through our bodies. I live in a city, and I find that many of my friends over-exercise as a way to “deal” with their internal problems. In our fast-paced world, many people use very yang/active movement way too much. They do not take rest days or, when they do, they don’t know how to properly use yin/restorative movement to nourish themselves from the inside out.

As human *beings*, not human *doings*, we need to step back and really see how our relationships to the natural balance – as seen in the nature world and in the seasons of our lives – play out daily. In order to live in a sustainable, healthy flow, our daily actions must be considered as part of the bigger universe in which we are living.

We are all in constant states of change and transition, literally moving from birth to childhood to adulthood to death. We are always moving. It’s up to us to embrace these transitions and realities. Or fight them and live with dis-ease. The more in tune we are with the movements and the truth of the larger contexts and systems within which we live, the more ease we can have.

How Does Activating Help You?

Think about activation in relation to your daily life? Do you ever consider your current age or season in life when you plan your movement practices? Do you think about the weather, moon cycle, or season in nature when you plan how you eat or move? And what about the balance and wisdom of yin/yang energy? Or what you are cultivating inside each day in the work you do, the media you listen to or watch, and the conversations you engage in.

I recently led a workshop on energy and we were talking about the ways in which we feed our masculine energy, the way we can live totally immersed in left-brain activities. We realized that some women in the group who lived in our very competitive, over-educated city had never considered that they may need to spend some time cultivating their feminine side. When we started to talk about ways we were contributing to our families and our lives, we realized that many of us were not in tune with the divine feminine that exists within us all.

Energetically, the feminine might look like spending quiet time in nature, creating art just for joy, snuggling our children for longer than normal vs the masculine running around with to do lists, building, doing, striving. In all human beings, we have both energies but what we do here is pay attention to what we feed, what we naturally align with and what ways we can intentionally energize our non- dominant energy.

In modern life we often have to rev up, push through, and work harder for “success,” which over-activates our masculine energy. Many of us need to spend time walking barefoot; tapping into our creative, right-brain gifts; and truly embracing our wholeness as a gateway to well-being.

Grab your journal and consider the list below, jotting down the ways you feed both sides. Do you naturally gravitate toward one side over the other? You can think about these areas of your life and consider which ones are over or under active. In what areas in your life do you need a bit more of a holistic approach? How engaged are you with intentionality and wholeness in your life? Here’s the list:

- **Yin/Yang Movement and Activities** – What type of exercise do you do? Do you do any? Is it always fast, sweaty, and intense? Is it always slow and steady?

- **Sun/Moon Practices** – What type of heated and intense practices, thoughts, or foods are in your life? In what ways do you honor the slower, cooler more thoughtful aspects of life?
- **Seasonal Foods and Self-Care Routines** – Do you consider the seasons when eating, exercising, resting, and taking care of yourself, changing the rituals and routines in line with mother nature?
- **Masculine/Feminine Energy** – In what ways do you plan, work, and stimulate your life? Do you use only computers and spreadsheets and documents? Do you spend time actively creating and nourishing your softer side? Do you meditate in a way that feeds either of these sides?
- **Right/Left Brain Work and Hobbies** – Do you favor order, control, and knowing? Are you able to be flexible, problem solve and enjoy your life using both sides of the brain?

So taking a look at all these areas, what do you notice? There are no right answers here, only information about how we live in balance, how we can consider all of these elements in relation to the season of our life, our day, our energy levels and our nature. Personally, I find this fascinating and an amazing guide to self- knowledge, a way for me to know more about what I put out in the world, at home and in my life. It's a way for me to notice when I feel strong or depleted, flaky or grounded

A Personal Activation Story

Twelve years ago, I was a gym rat. I went every day. This is what you would see: me on the cross-trainer with the TV on, my headphones on – listening to loud music *and* watching a show. I'm over –stimulated just remembering it! Then there were the 30 or so people who were also in the room, doing the same thing. I went to the gym after teaching 25 kindergarten students all day long. Basically, I was living in a state of constant stimulation, putting my nervous and immune system in overdrive all my waking hours. I did not fuel my body with nourishing food but instead choose the low-fat, low-carb options of everything, with a Diet Coke always on the side. Needless to say, I was *exhausted* all the time.

After those workout sessions, I would usually go home and get back to work with lesson planning, or I would go to some kind of community meeting I'd committed myself to. I was very active on a number of boards and in various groups, and I was being pulled in all directions.

I did not have the tools to properly take care of myself. I was so deep into those responsibilities that I could not find a way out, so I just kept adding on more. My brain hurt all the time, and I was sick with a cold almost every Friday night. My allergies flared up all over the place when the season changed. I could barely stay awake in the afternoons and had to rely on more soda pop and at least one Weight Watchers diet shake.

The scariest thing happened one day when I fell asleep as I was driving home from work. That scared me so bad I actually decided to chain smoke on the way home in order to stay awake while driving. I had never been taught about living in tune with seasons or energies, had never been exposed to "divine feminine" or "right brain" practices. All I knew was go, go, go, more, more, more.

And then something happened. I woke up one morning and could not walk. I called out for my boyfriend, and he came in and saw that I could not move. He took me to the hospital and, in the waiting room, I passed out from pain. I went in for testing and scans. They found nothing. That was the beginning of my journey to health, wholeness, and feeling deeply what the effects overdoing it can do on the body.

After about six months of inquiry, I finally found a fabulous physical therapist who was able to assess my external physical condition as piriformis syndrome. This is a condition in which the piriformis muscle, spasms and causes pain in the glutes and hips. I probably had it as a result of either just my anatomy *or* the over-exercising I'd been doing with no stretching or rest days.

But I know there is more to it. I now know that everything I was doing in my life was contributing in some way to my dis-ease. My overworking, under-eating, overstimulation, and living out of alignment with nature deeply effected all aspects of my life. I can see now how it impacted my energy in my relationships and, primarily, with myself.

That was a very difficult time for my health. Underneath all of the anger, resentment, stress, and pain, I knew I wanted a different life, a different way of being. It has taken me years to heal and to uncover all the ways in which I was hurting myself, and to practice something different.

I remember that girl in the gym, holding her breath, waiting for life to happen, numbing herself with anything she could... and I bow deeply to her, to the overworked and overwhelmed parts of all of us. That part of us is trying to get our attention so we can activate in a different way to get a different outcome.

As we journey on together, know that you are supported as you take action. Know that the deepest and most profound challenges of your life are the beautiful doorways that lead to your soul. Take steps in that direction. You were meant to be free and healthy and energetic and alive, each and every day.

Mind-Body Practice

Let's start by activating our yin energy, our female energy, our moon practice, to see how deeply the integration of movement and somatic experiences within contemplation, stillness, inquiry and philosophy can profoundly effect our lives.

Stand tall and place your feet a bit wider than hip distance. Slightly bend your knees. Move your hands out in front on an inhale and move them around to your sides. Exhale and draw them back in towards center. Open your mouth on the inhales, then exhale with an open mouth and feel your belly contract. Repeat this for up to ten breaths. Try to take it nice and slow, allowing yourself space between breaths and lengthening out the breaths as well, so that you extend and expand and are able to slow it all down. The more you practice, the longer you will be able to extend and expand your breath.

Now let's create some heat by doing a sun practice as a way to activate yang energy. With a mindful breath, do ten jumping jacks. Feel them into your toes and hands, and feel the shifts that occur within your body. Then go down into a plank pose. Hold it for three breaths. Go into dog pose and hold for three breaths. Next, take ten breaths and switch between the two poses. Inhale forward into plank pose and exhale back into dog. Take your time. Breathe deeply. Feel your abdominal muscles activate. Feel the whole-body strength needed to move through these poses.

Chapter 8 – Awaken

"Life and death are of supreme importance. Time swiftly passes by and opportunity is lost. Each of us should strive to awaken. Awaken. Take heed, do not squander your life."

Dogen Zenji

What is Awakening?

The practice of being awake is to about becoming conscious or aware of something. In this case, in this context, "something" is *life*. This whole process of moving through the principles lands us here, at being awake in our lives, to our lives, as they are. Once this becomes part of a daily practice, we see things differently, once we awaken, there's no turning back.

Why Is Being Awake Important?

It is from an awakened place that we see our lives as incredible gifts. The resulting gratitude practice becomes an easy, daily access point to love, peace, and self-trust. The more you see your life in this way, the more you will experience moment-to-moment insights of powerful emotions breathing and moving through you. Suddenly, your garden's flowers are more beautiful than you ever remember them being. Your drive to work becomes an opportunity to see the world, and you start to notice things around you in new and interesting ways. You awaken.

It's in the beauty of this moment that we realize how short our time is here on Earth. Our faces age and change, our hair color grays. But we begin to understand the profoundness of being part of something as big as the universe. At the same time, we see that our lives are so small and go by so fast that we don't need to take *everything* so seriously. We feel the seasons change around us and we move in flow with what nature is calling for. We can back off a little from the negative personal narrative and the monkey mind demands of our day-to-day and instead live more in the now. People start to notice something about us and to say things like, "You look different. You look younger, lighter." And you can feel the energy of love pulse through you daily. You are alive.

Our ability to become awake to the precious, ever-changing nature of life and realize the unavoidable, continuous transformation that happens daily, allows us to change our minds, be open to new experiences, shift gears, pivot, leave toxic relationships, and, ultimately, live in peace with what is.

How Does Being Awake Help You?

When we awaken, we become sensitive to our emotions and to those around us in new ways. Compassion for our fellow humans erupts from within, and we see now how alike we truly are. We let go of the tight grip of having to “know everything,” or thinking we do, because being awake gives us a tiny taste of the vast and interconnected world.

The big take-away here is how little we actually control. This one is so hard for us to believe. We do so much these days to control our lives – from planning and scheduling to prepping and worrying. When we consider our lives through awakened eyes and hearts, we know the loss of a loved one is inevitable. We know the job will end, this day will pass, and the proud moments and the terrifying ones are all part of the wholeness of our lives. And we feel all the feelings.

Here is the paradox of it all: the daily action of being awake to the crying child, barking dog, hunger pains, line at grocery store, angry neighbor is truly the doorway to a deeper freedom, a connection, a knowing that we all are one. Our deepest, most profound practice comes when we let go a bit more each day and surrender to our lives *as they are*. It’s in making the changes we need to, as we go on our journey, and not resisting or fighting changes as they arise. And, on the other hand, not creating drama when we feel restless.

This subtle shift becomes the greatest gift to your daily life, and this radiates out to affect more of your self, your family, your community, and our whole world. At this point, our faith and devotion to the magical mystery of it all may appear, deepen, and strengthen. It’s here in the quiet beauty of everyday life where we can look beyond small thinking and irritations and arrive at surrender, and actually let this incredible experience become our lives. Our sacred, ordinary life becomes the one we have been waiting for.

A Personal Awakening Story

I grew up in a Reform Jewish family. I spent time in Israel in college and went to Jewish summer camp as a kid. By the time I was an adult, I did not believe in or understand God. I stayed away from anything talking about, singing about, or rejoicing in the concept/being/idea of God that I could not touch, see, feel, or know. I felt a lot of confusion and anger around how anyone *could* love God. I mean, I just did not understand what they were celebrating and praying to. I was a bit closed-minded, critical, and judgmental about the whole concept.

The first few years I studied yoga, I saw the word God come up a few times. I heard people refer to things as God-like, and I think I shut down so fast I was not truly listening to the rest of the conversation or even trying to wrap my head around they meant. I just rejected it all.

Fast forward to about 5 years into my steady, regular yoga practice. I was in my normal class with my regular teacher. I was over by the window and the sun was setting. The room was warm and I don't remember anything unusual about that day, except that as I moved into my triangle pose, facing the windows, I felt the warmth of the sun on my face. Without any warning, an extreme energy started to spread through my whole body. From fingers to toes, I felt love. I felt awareness and presence in a way that was totally new to me. I felt *yoga*. I felt God. I felt the divine. It brought me right to tears. I slowly came out of the pose. And I believed. *Oh, this is it*, I thought. *This is the body I have. This is the world I live in. These are the other beings I am connected to.* I felt completely awake to the experience, to the moment, and I became one with the divine and the divine became one with me. In an instant, I was awake to my body, mind, and spirit. It was so beyond anything I could control.

From that moment on, I have been less critical. Something in that pose, in that moment, showed me love, wholeness, and the divine. It gave me a willingness to be open, to let things be possible, to not have to know so much, and to be okay with the not knowing.

I wrote in my journal, "I had an experience with the divine today." Our teacher encouraged us to surrender to something greater, and I did. And it happened.

I began to love more, to feel more, and to accept my past for what it was. Shortly after that experience, I reconnected with Judaism. I allowed myself to be open-minded and open-hearted, to connect with that rich history in a much more meaningful way. My awakening led me to more love and clarity. It became an entry point to living a life that brought less running around with a to-do list, and more seeing each day as a sacred gift.

Last winter, in the middle of a morning meditation while on a retreat, with sunlight on my face, I felt it again. That time the light, the energy was so powerful and lasted a few minutes. My body felt like it was pulsating. The window overlooked an incredible view of barren winter fields. It was beautiful naked and raw and cold. The warmth, the light was coming from within. I recognized the feeling from before, and I welcomed it in. It was the feeling of being totally awake. I smiled. I felt delighted.

Mind-Body Practice

For this practice, I keep your eyes open. Sit in a chair or on the floor, with your spine upright. You can sit up against a wall or propped up on a bolster, yoga block, or meditation cushion. Keep your eyes open, your gaze soft and down, right in front of where you are. See your life. Begin counting your breaths. Count your breaths and keep your awareness on the breaths, on the counting: inhale one, exhale two, inhale three, exhale four. Breathe and count to 10. If you get lost, come back to one. Be gentle with yourself as you begin, and let the breaths be full and easy, soft and smooth. Every time your mind wanders, come back to one.

You can do this practice for anywhere from five to 30 minutes a day. Enjoy.

* * *

An Invitation

You made it. You are here. You have tools to help you, inspire you, and encourage you along the way. Stepping into ease and joy in our daily lives is a miracle. An awakening. A gift.

Honor where you are in your life. Know that you are loved and supported and whole, just as you are. Let the magic of your life be your life.

I'm on the sidelines, cheering for you the whole way home. We've got this.

Acknowledgments

As I finish this book, my heart overflows with joy for all the incredible people in my life.

I saw the faces of our lil omm community members over and over in my mind as I wrote this book. I want to acknowledge how each one of you have made an impact on my life. One night, late in January, I looked around the room to see the faces of young and old. I saw bodies of all shapes and sizes. I saw laughter, tears, beauty – and then we danced. We lined up in two rows, all of us – big and little, kids and toddlers, mamas and dads, friends, neighbors, and yogis – and we moved together in this space of our yoga studio, one final time before we moved on.

Thank you, lil omm teachers and students, for teaching me how to lead, how to love, and how to show up and be strong and brave when it was easy and when it was hard. Thanks for linking arms with me on this mission for wholeness and wellness in our lives, with ourselves and our families.

As we expand our community and our movement beyond four walls, I can always feel my practice breathing right here with me. I feel all my teachers holding me, supporting me, guiding me onward. Thank you.

Nothing in life is of any importance without friends who cheer you on, read your writing, edit your drafts, and make you laugh when it gets messy. Meredith, Chrys, and Anna, thank you for holding my hand and my heart when it was hard.

Saylor and Milo, you sweet little rascals, may you live well.

About the Author



Pleasance Silicki is an entrepreneur, coach, creator, teacher, writer, and magic-maker. She is the founder of lil omm yoga, a wellness and lifestyle movement that leads trainings, workshops, retreats, and classes for all ages (even babies!). Her life mission is to inspire communities and create meaningful connections for human *beings* through yoga, play, meditation, journaling, laughter, and honest conversations.

Pleasance has been a teacher in various forms for more than fifteen years, working in yoga studios, public and private school classrooms, and giving large and small workshops and retreats. Her background includes collaborations with other social entrepreneurs and community organizations. She's a lifelong learner who's passionate about living an engaged, meaningful life and sharing what she learns.

She has studied yoga and meditation with Karen Maezen Miller, Erich Schiffman, Max Strom, Rod Stryker, Erin Maile O'Keefe and the Mohans. And she loves learning about whole-hearted living from Brené Brown, and creativity from Elizabeth Gilbert.

As co-founder of The National Kids Yoga Conference and Septima Clark Public Charter School, Pleasance engages in meaningful projects that bring people together. She is currently on the board of Tenleytown Main Streets Program and Fitscene, a women's fitness movement. She has taught at George Mason University and American University.

Pleasance currently lives and loves in Washington, DC, with her husband and two children, spreading love, magic, and glitter to those around her. You can find her online at www.lilomm.com.



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You can email me to find out more information about my retreats, workshops, or private sessions (in-person or online), at pleasance@lilomm.com.

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