

The Three Hearts

A Somatic Map for Sustainable Ecological Service

Martin Reinholtz MSc • naturligpsykologi.no • Easter 2026

Understanding arose through generative talks in the presence of Mari, Soren, and Yanitsa.

AI was sparingly used to fuse the different strands together which equals the following: Every AI query quietly drinks from the Earth's land, water, minerals, and atmosphere, and soul — for this article, including the building of AI infrastructure : a glass of water, a gram of carbon, a sliver of sacred ground — in a transaction the Earth was never asked to agree to. The author takes full responsibility for this usage, and recognizes its weight, and the entailing responsibility.

“The world does not need more people who can think clearly about ecology. It needs people through whom the living world can think, feel, and speak.”

How to read this map

This article moves through four registers, and it may help to know which is which as you read. Phenomenological observation — what was found somatically, through lived experience — is the primary level and the foundation on which everything else rests. Tradition-based interpretation (Taoist, Vedantic, Chinese medicine) is offered as a convergent lens: not as proof, but as evidence that many independent lineages arrived at closely related territory. Research from adjacent fields (cardiac neuroscience, hemisphere lateralisation, compassion science) is cited where it is consistent with the framework, while acknowledging that mechanistic claims remain genuinely open. The integrated model has not been formally studied.

The arc of the article itself moves from the personal and experiential, through the academic and traditional, and into the felt and relational — ending not with a conclusion but with a path: a somatic orientation that may make ecological service genuinely sustainable. It is offered in Wilber's vision-logic register: multiple perspectives held simultaneously, in service of a more whole picture. It is not asking to be believed. It is asking to be tried.

A note on the journey this map describes: moving from the left heart toward the right, and into the warmth of the centre, is not a technique to be applied. It is a direction to be grown into — through time, through grief, through practice, and with support. The exercises in this article are invitations, not protocols. What the author found in a period of deep personal descent cannot be handed to another as a method. It can only point.

A note before you read

This article moves through territory that includes personal wounding, centre-level trauma, and practices of interior somatic attention. For most readers this will be navigable and self-paced. However, if you carry a history of significant relational, developmental, or body-held trauma — particularly if that trauma involved moments of maximum openness or betrayal — some sections and practices may touch tender ground.

The practices offered here are maps for exploration, not clinical protocols. They are not a substitute for skilled therapeutic support. If at any point you notice distress, contraction, or dissociation,

please set the article down and return when you have more ground beneath you — or explore this territory with a trusted somatic practitioner alongside.

The article will keep. Your nervous system comes first.

Key terms as used in this article

Left / Right / Centre heart — not anatomical locations but somatic functional centres: distinct felt qualities of attention, identity, and energy accessible within the chest.

I Am — the bare sense of existing, prior to any story about who that I is. Closer to Maharshi's Hridayam than to the ego-self of personality psychology.

Tao / Te (Dé, pronounced approximately “dur” — a soft, falling tone) — used in the classical Taoist sense: Tao as undivided ground; Te/Dé as the particular expression of that ground through a singular form. Not metaphysical claims but functional pointers. The sound of the word itself — a soft, downward resonance — may be felt in the body as a descent into the centre.

Chi / qi — used phenomenologically: the quality of felt aliveness and energetic coherence that follows attentional direction. No claim is made about its biophysical substrate.

Middle dan tian — the centre elixir field of Taoist internal cultivation, governing shen (spirit-consciousness). Used here as a traditional map that may correspond to the felt centre described.

An Unexpected Discovery

Something unexpected happened during a period of deep recovery. Sitting quietly — not meditating formally, not analysing — attention drifted to the right side of the chest. Not the left, where grief and love and the personal self have always lived. The right side. Slightly unfamiliar. Quieter.

The thinker — which had been running almost continuously for years — moved downward. Quieted. Not suppressed. Simply... grounded.

That single moment pointed toward something that may be both practically important and largely unmapped: that the human chest contains not one but three distinct functional centres — left, right, and centre — and that which centre we habitually work from has profound consequences for how we serve, how we sustain ourselves, and whether the world's grief moves through us or accumulates in us.

This article is experiential in origin. It is offered not as settled theory but as a somatic framework — a map drawn from lived investigation, placed in conversation with adjacent bodies of research. The map is not the territory. But a good map, even a provisional one, can change where a person is able to walk.

The map at a glance

Centre	Function	Risk / vulnerability	Ecological service role
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Left heart	Personal emotion: love, grief, compassion, longing	Compassion fatigue when grief has no larger ground	Feels the particular: this person, this loss, this tree
Right heart	Impersonal awareness; seat of I Am prior to personal content	Easily missed; requires non-grasping attention	Opens toward the whole; transmits ground rather than feeling
Centre (Te / Dé)	Warmth generated by the meeting of personal and vast	Wounded at moments of maximum openness	Field presence; soul expression; coherent transmission
Chi dimension	Attentional direction reorganises felt energy field	Head-accumulation when attention is chronically displaced upward	Consistent right-side attention restores middle dan tian fullness

Where This Came From: A Bounded Personal Account

Before a significant relational trauma while stabilised in kensho — where self-referential thinking had stopped — there was a quality of being in the world that felt entirely natural: a playful, non-comparative openness. No one was seen as higher or lower. There was no need to establish position. The self was simply present, without requiring definition.

Then, through the initiatory strike that landed directly in the heart centre and left heart, that quality vanished. The strike, because of the absence of ego structures to absorb it, landed in the deepest layers of being — under identity, under emotion, and beyond. In its place came something that only became clear in retrospect: the I had relocated into thinking. All sense of being and doing became routed through conceptual processing. Self-concepts proliferated — constant comparison, the measuring of self against others, the attempt to locate and establish identity through definition. In the author’s own words, claimed explicitly at the time: “all my doing and being is rooted through thinking.”

This is not unusual after relational wounding. But naming it precisely matters: the problem was not thinking itself. Thinking is a magnificent capacity. The problem was that the I had taken up residence inside the thinking — had come to believe it was the thinking — and so could not put the thinking down. A thinker identified with I sees everything as thinking and tries to define both self and world through conceptual contrast. It needs hierarchy and comparison because thinking can only know itself by contrast. Without an other to define against, the thinking-I feels it is disappearing.

Playfulness, by contrast, appears to be what happens when the I is at home in itself and needs no contrast to feel real. It is not a mood. In this framework, it is the signature of correct somatic location.

Two things eventually pointed the way back. One was extended time in wild nature — where the non-human world offers no hierarchy, no self-concept to push against,

nothing to compare with. The forest simply is, without commentary, and in that presence the referential loop loses its grip. The city even became permeable afterwards — the I remaining porous because the comparison mechanism had temporarily stopped generating the sense of separation.

The other was time to digest deep layers of the psyche, and the help of a therapist skilled in the territory and to see the gift in the wound.

The recovery period that followed — sitting quietly, attention drifting to the right side of the chest — was, in retrospect, the I finding its way home. Not to somewhere new. To somewhere remembered.

What follows is the map that emerged from that finding.

The Left Heart: The Personal Self

Most people in the healing and ecological service professions live primarily from the left chest. This is the home of personal emotion — love, grief, longing, compassion, the felt sense of being someone who cares deeply. It is real, necessary, and irreplaceable.

But the left heart has a structural vulnerability: it is bounded. It is personal. And when we route planetary grief, collective trauma, or the pain of ecological destruction through a bounded personal heart — without any larger ground beneath it — that heart begins to fill. Then overflow. Then close.

Francis Weller, in *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*²⁴, describes what he calls the five gates of grief — the multiple thresholds through which the un-lived, unmourned, and unacknowledged losses of a life accumulate in the body and the soul. His work is a precise cartography of the left heart's territory: the grief we carry for what we have loved and lost, for what was never received, for the sorrows of the world, for what we expected of life that did not arrive, and for the ancestral grief inherited before we were born.

Weller's central insight is that grief is not a pathology to be processed and resolved. It is the price of love — and refusing to feel it does not make it disappear. It simply relocates. Into the body. Into numbness. Into the compulsive busyness that characterises so much ecological service work. Grief held alone tends to become either overwhelming or frozen. Grief held in community — witnessed, honoured, given ritual container — moves through. The left heart was not designed to carry the world's sorrow as a private burden. It was designed to grieve with others, in forms that acknowledge the scale of what is actually being felt. This is why ecological service without genuine grief practice tends toward burnout: the left heart fills with unacknowledged sorrow and gradually closes — not from weakness, but from the structural impossibility of bearing unlimited grief through a bounded personal instrument, alone, without the larger containers of community, ritual, and the somatic ground this article describes. The left heart was never meant to carry this alone. The path back is not to force it open, but to warm it from the right — to let the fool discover, gently and with support, that the sage has been standing beside it the whole time.

This is the experiential core of what Figley¹ named compassion fatigue: not weakness, not insufficient commitment, but the consequence of running effectively unlimited suffering through a finite personal instrument. Research by Klimecki and Singer² makes a useful distinction here between empathic distress — the self-referential uptake of another's pain, which activates stress systems and depletes over time — and compassionate concern, which is warm and other-directed but held within equanimous spaciousness. The former is characteristically left-dominant. The latter, this framework suggests, may require the ground of the right heart and centre.

The Work That Reconnects³, Joanna Macy's framework for ecological grief and action, was designed to move grief through rather than accumulate it. And yet many facilitators burn out. Something may be missing from the somatic understanding of how the work is held in the body. That missing piece, this framework proposes, is the channel through which the grief flows.

Macy has said that when the heart breaks open, it can hold the whole universe³. This image carries real truth — and the author wishes to add one somatic nuance: what opens the heart need not be fracture. It can be softening. Not the drama of collapse, but the slow, willing restoration of flow. The left heart, under the weight of planetary grief, does not need to shatter to expand. It needs to release its exclusive grip — to willingly hand over, to the larger ground of the right heart and centre, the weight it has been carrying alone. When it does, something unexpected is found: the grief has no bottom, but neither does the capacity to hold it. The personal gives way — not to nothing, and not through breaking, but through a kind of yielding. The softening is the passage. The centre is what the left heart, in softening, opens into, supported by the right.

The Right Heart: Impersonal Awareness

Ramana Maharshi, one of the most significant contemplative figures of the twentieth century, pointed consistently to the right side of the chest as the seat of the Self — what he called the Hridayam⁴. Not the emotional heart on the left. Not the heart chakra at centre. A subtler location, slightly right of the sternum: the root of the sense of I Am, prior to any personal content.

Maharshi himself pointed to a convergent text — one that reaches across traditions in a single stroke. In recorded dialogue he cited Ecclesiastes 10:2, in the King James rendering: “a wise man's heart is at his right hand; but a fool's heart at his left.”²⁸ He also cited the Ashtanga Hridayam, the classical Ayurvedic medical text, which locates the seat of consciousness similarly. On the surface, this appears to dismiss the left heart entirely — to name it the territory of the unwise, the misdirected, the lost.

This article does not read it that way. There is an older story — older than Ecclesiastes, older than the Vedas — of the Fool whose role is precisely to become wise. In the Tarot's Major Arcana, the Fool carries the number zero: not nothing, but the whole unformed potential of the journey before it has taken shape.²⁹ Card zero steps off the cliff not from stupidity but from a quality of trust so complete it has not yet learned to be afraid. Every card that follows — every station of experience, grief, loss, integration and illumination

— is the Fool becoming. The wise man's heart may be at his right. But he began, as we all did, with his heart on the left.

Jung, who engaged deeply with the Tarot archetypes as expressions of the collective unconscious,³¹ understood this journey as individuation: the long process by which the whole Self — not the ego alone, not the persona, but the totality of what a person is — comes into honest relationship with itself. The Fool in Jungian reading is not a failure of wisdom. The Fool is the Self before differentiation — open, unguarded, naive in the original sense of being close to birth. The journey through the Major Arcana is the journey from naive wholeness through wounding, disorientation, grief, and integration toward conscious wholeness: the I that has made the full circuit and returned, changed, to its ground.

The wounded healer tradition — documented across shamanic cultures by Mircea Eliade³⁰ — describes a parallel arc: the apprentice shaman passes through a period of dismemberment, sacred illness, and sacred foolishness before integration. The one who weeps for everything, who cannot yet hold grief in a larger ground, who is flooded by what they feel — this is not a failed practitioner. This is someone at the beginning of the journey. The fool's situation is not that the heart lives on the left. The fool's situation is that it lives only there — personal, bounded, without the larger ground — and has not yet discovered that wisdom lives just to its right, patient and unhurried, waiting to be found. The movement toward integration is not a correction of the fool. It is the fool becoming whole.

The journey from fool to wise, in this reading, runs through grief — through the left heart breaking open, through the sorrow of the world moving into a body that cannot yet hold it, through all the stations of loss and disorientation that Weller maps in his five gates.²⁴ It is not a comfortable journey and it does not proceed in a straight line. But it has a direction: from the left heart alone, toward the gradual discovery that something faint and prior lives on the right — and that between them, when they meet in honest contact, the warmth that has always been the heart's deepest nature begins to flow again. The article you are reading is, in one sense, a map of that journey.

One honest caution is worth naming here, offered by Maharshi himself: if you go looking for the I in the right chest, you will not find it. The I, when attention turns to locate it as an object, tends to dissolve — or to reveal that it was never a located thing at all. What may be found instead is something quieter: a faint resonance, a quality of ground, a direction in which the I seems to belong. We are not trying to capture the right heart. We are softly calling the I thought or feeling home.

Maharshi described something this framework has found somatically: that the I-thought — the fundamental movement of self-referential consciousness — does not originate in the head, where it appears to live in some cases. It descends. It goes to the heart. And the location he indicated, repeatedly, was the right side of the chest — not as a physical organ but as the felt seat of pure subjectivity, of awareness that witnesses without being any particular content.

In the author's own investigation, this points toward something specific: not the full right chest as such, but a faint centre of gravity in the right side of the central chest — a

place where the sense of I Am seems to have its somatic root, prior to any story about who that I is. It is easy to miss. It requires patient, non-grasping attention. But once found, it has a quality the left side does not: it is untouched. It has not been through the personal history. It is, in the only adequate word, prior.

The distinction is simple but consequential: the I is not the thinking. The I is what notices the thinking. When the I finds its place — faintly, somatically, in the right chest — it no longer needs to be the thinking in order to feel real. Thinking is then freed to do what it actually does well: map, articulate, respond. It no longer has to carry the impossible weight of being the route to wholeness.

This is also why the I identified with thinking tends to reach compulsively toward the whole — trying to think the universe, to comprehend everything — while the I returned to the right chest simply rests as continuous with the whole, without effort. The reaching is the symptom of the displacement. The return makes the reaching unnecessary.

This territory connects with converging lines of research, though none map it directly. McGilchrist's extensive review of hemisphere lateralisation⁵ documents that the right hemisphere of the brain operates in ways consistent with what Maharshi described: attending to what is living and relational, sustaining awareness of the whole without collapsing it into categories. The left hemisphere operates analytically, self-referentially — and controls the right side of the body. The contralateral wiring means the right chest is left-hemisphere connected: which may contribute to why right-chest awareness tends to produce a quieting of the analytical mode, or why it seems to operate at a level beneath hemispheric dominance altogether.

Research on cardiac autonomic asymmetry⁶ further suggests the chest's left/right geography is neurologically non-arbitrary, though the specific implications for somatic practice remain genuinely open. The felt distinction between a flooded, contracted state and a grounded, spacious one is real as phenomenology regardless of the precise mechanism.

The right heart, in this map, is not cold or detached. It is the awareness that holds everything — grief, fear, love, ecological devastation — without being destroyed by it. It has no edge, no capacity to be overwhelmed. Not because it is removed from experience, but because it is as large as everything that arises within it. This is what the softening left heart discovers it is continuous with — not through fracture, but through a gradual, willing release. Not a void. Not dissolution. The vast, untroubled ground that was always present, just to the right of the personal boundary, waiting without urgency to be recognised.

A brief note on the felt sense (Gendlin)

Eugene Gendlin discovered that the body holds a form of knowing that precedes language. He called it the felt sense: not a clear emotion, not a thought, but a vague, often hard-to-name quality in the body — a thickness, a weight, a constriction, a subtle aliveness — that, when gently attended to, begins to reveal its meaning from within.

The felt sense is pre-conceptual. It is the body's way of holding a whole situation before the mind has broken it into parts. It arises most clearly when you slow down, turn attention inward, and wait — without agenda — for something to make itself known.

One starting point: ask yourself where in your body you feel a sense of I right now. Don't decide in advance. Just notice. It might be behind the eyes — that bright, restless place where thinking often lives. Or the back of the skull. Or the left chest, full and tender. Or the solar plexus. Somewhere unexpected. The felt sense approach asks you to meet whatever is actually there. That same quality of patient, non-imposing attention is what the exercise below invites toward a single specific location: the right side of the chest.

PRACTICE: Sensing the Ground of the Right Chest

An invitation to soften toward — not to find. Drawing on Ramana Maharshi's Hridayam inquiry, Gendlin's felt sense, and the inner resonance of sound

Preparation

Sit comfortably. Let the spine be easy but upright. Allow the breath to settle without directing it. Give yourself at least ten to fifteen minutes of unhurried time.

Before turning toward the right chest, take a moment to locate yourself somatically. Ask inwardly, without agenda: where in my body do I feel most "I" right now? Don't decide. Simply wait. Let the body answer. Perhaps it is behind the eyes — that bright, restless place where thinking often lives. Or at the back of the skull. Or in the left chest, full and tender. Or the solar plexus. Or somewhere more diffuse.

Note wherever the felt sense of I first appears. You will return to notice whether it shifts.

Step 1 — The whispered I

Maharshi's central instruction was deceptively simple: trace the I-thought to its source. Not through philosophical reasoning, but by turning attention toward the very sense of I itself — the bare, pre-verbal feeling of existing — and following it inward until it reveals where it lives.

Begin here: form the word "I" inwardly — not spoken aloud, not thought loudly, but whispered without voice. A breath that almost has a shape. No vibration in the throat. Simply the inner gesture of the word, as faint as you can make it.

Now — with the gentleness of a hand placed very lightly on still water — feel whether there is a faint resonance anywhere in the body in response. Not a sensation you create. Something that may already be there, waiting to be noticed.

In particular: bring attention to the right side of the central chest — not the left where love and grief live, not the heart chakra at centre, but a point slightly right of the sternum, approximately where the sternum meets the fourth rib. It is a subtle location. Easy to miss. There is no dramatic sensation to seek.

Say I again — with no voice at all. And wait. Is there something there? A faint warmth. A very slight weight. A quality of recognition, as if something in the body knows this word belongs here rather than in the head.

Step 2 — With music: Peter Tosh, “I Am That I Am”

If you have access to it, put on Peter Tosh’s “I Am That I Am” — a piece that draws directly on the same divine self-declaration Maharshi pointed to: Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh, I Am That I Am. Let the music begin before you engage with it analytically. Let the sound enter the room. And then — if the body is willing — let it move. Sway. Hum. Sing the words if they come. The Rastafari tradition from which this music arose understood the I as something to be inhabited physically, not only contemplated. Tosh is not merely singing about the ground of being. He is calling you into it, rhythmically, with the whole body. Let the call in.

Place one hand lightly on the right side of your chest — not pressing, just resting. As the music plays and the phrase “I Am” is sounded and sung, feel whether the words land somewhere in the body rather than simply passing through the ears and dissolving into thought. If the urge to move arises — to sway, to step, even to dance — follow it. The body has its own way of recognising what the mind is still trying to understand. Let it know before the mind does. You are welcome to explore the felt sense from the left to the right and the center heart area as you wish, notice any resonance.

This is not about the music as aesthetic experience. It is using sound as a carrier wave for the felt sense. The vibration of “I Am” has been used across contemplative traditions — from Vedantic inquiry to Exodus 3:14 — as a pointer toward the ground of existence itself. Let it point. Feel where it lands. And if you find yourself singing, loudly and swaying without quite deciding to — good. That is the body leading. That is the practice working.

Step 3 — The Maharshi inquiry: who is the I that is aware?

Maharshi’s instruction was not to answer “who am I?” with a concept, but to use the question as a needle — to find the one who is asking. The I-thought, he said, arises and merges back. To find its source, turn attention toward the bare subject: the one to whom all experience appears.

Try this now. Let a question form inwardly — not as words but as a gentle turning of attention: to whom does this experience appear? Who is aware of the breath? Who notices the music?

Don’t follow the question into thought. Instead, as the question forms, let attention drop — downward, out of the head, below the collarbone. Feel whether there is a centre of gravity somewhere in the right side of the chest that quietly registers: here. I am here.

Maharshi described the Hridayam as the place where the I-thought descends when thought is not grasping outward. It is not visualised. It is felt — faintly, as a kind of somatic rightness, a place where the sense of being seems to have a natural

home before it is displaced upward into the head and confused with thinking. Maharshi was also clear that if you go looking for the I with the intention of finding it, you will not find it — because the I, when attention turns toward it as an object, dissolves. This practice is not a search. It is a gentle homecoming: softening attention in a direction, leaving the door open, and waiting without agenda for a faint resonance that may or may not be there today. Some days it is. Some days it is not. Both are fine. The journey takes time.

Step 4 — Noticing what happens in the head

When the I settles into the right chest — even briefly, even faintly — turn attention gently upward and notice what is happening in the head.

Is thinking still occurring? It may be. But notice: is it felt as something you are, or something you are watching? The thinker that has to be the I — that drives forward, comparing, defining, reaching for the next thought — does it have the same grip?

Many people notice a quieting. Not the absence of thought, but a change in its relationship to the one who thinks. The head becomes lighter. Thought becomes optional rather than obligatory. This is not a trance state. It is closer to what Maharshi meant by the natural condition — thinking available, but no longer confused with the being who thinks.

Closing

Return to the felt sense survey you began with. Where in the body does aliveness feel most present now? Has anything shifted?

There is no correct answer. What matters is the quality of attention — unhurried, genuinely curious, willing to receive rather than produce. The right chest will not announce itself. It is, in Maharshi's word, prior — and prior things are quiet.

A note for those with trauma history: if attending to the chest area brings distress, contraction, or dissociation, please do not push through alone. This kind of interior attention is best supported by a skilled somatic practitioner — particularly when there is a history of centre-level wounding as described in this article. These practices are maps for exploration, not clinical protocols.

The Centre: Dé / Te as Living Warmth

Between left and right — personal self and impersonal awareness — lies the centre. And here something unexpected emerges: not a compromise between the two, but a warmth generated by their meeting.

The Tao Te Ching⁷ names this directly. Tao is the undivided ground, the vast impersonal that underlies all things. Te — in classical Chinese, Dé (pronounced approximately as a soft “dur,” a falling tone that seems to drop into the body rather than rise from it) — is the particular expression of that ground through a singular form. Not the ground itself, and not separate from it, but the ground becoming particular without ceasing to be the

ground. The sound of the word is itself instructive: soft, downward, arriving rather than announcing. It does not project. It inhabits.

The right heart opens toward Tao. The left heart is the particular human form. The centre — the warmth between them — may be experienced as Dé/Te: the living transmission of the whole through this specific person, in this specific moment, toward this specific need in the world.

Soul, in Plotkin's language⁸. The intersection of one's deepest nature and the world's deepest need. Could a balanced centre be Te — the soul embodied? The separate self becomes the medium through which the whole moves. The centre is not a spiritual achievement; it is the natural result of left and right coming into honest relationship.

What contemplative and indigenous traditions have called transmission, field presence, or soul expression — the quality by which a genuinely mature person organically stabilises a group — may be the natural consequence of Dé/Te flowing freely through a coherent centre. HeartMath research has documented that coherent emotional states — particularly those combining personal warmth with equanimous spaciousness — generate ordered electromagnetic field patterns that measurably influence the nervous systems of those nearby^{9,10}. This may be one physical signature of what the traditions have named. The mechanism remains genuinely open; the felt phenomenon does not.

PRACTICE: The Meeting of Hands

Place your hands together, palm to palm.

Left hand: you — the particular human being with your specific history, wounds, gifts, and grief.

Right hand: the whole — the living web of existence, the vast ground that holds everything without being troubled by any of it.

Hold them together gently. Not pressing. Simply in contact. Notice the warmth that arises between them.

That warmth may be experienced as Dé / Te — the meeting point of the personal and the vast, the soul felt as living heat in the center of the hands loving the separate and the whole equally. Stay here for a moment. This is also the center between the left and right heart this article is pointing toward.

Gratitude and the Opening of the Centre

There is a form of gratitude that is not a practice in the effortful sense — not a list made each morning, not a reframe applied to difficulty. It is what arises naturally when the separate self and the vast are felt in honest contact.

Place the hands together. Feel the completeness of the gesture. Something in the body already knows this meeting — already recognises, before thought arrives to name it, that

both are here: the personal and the whole, neither lost, neither dominant. In that recognition, something sways. A warmth that is also a kind of astonishment. This is the oldest form of gratitude: not thankfulness directed toward an object, but the felt sense of being included in something that did not have to include anything at all.

Emmons and McCullough's research on gratitude²¹ documents measurable effects on wellbeing, cardiac coherence, and prosocial behaviour. But the somatic gateway to gratitude this framework points toward is prior to any intentional practice. It is what becomes available when the centre between left and right is open and warm: the direct perception that existence itself is, as it were, unnecessary — and therefore astonishing. That the grass is here. That there is warmth between the hands. That there is someone to feel it.

This quality of gratitude — what might be called groundless gratitude, arising without particular cause — is both a sign that the centre is open and a means of opening it further. When the heart contracts around wound or grief, a gentle invitation to notice what is also here — the breath, the warmth, the fact of existing — does not bypass the grief. It gives the grief a larger ground in which to be felt without becoming everything. The Benedictine monk Brother David Steindl-Rast, who has written most precisely on this territory, describes gratitude not as a response to good things but as a response to the gift character of every moment — including the difficult ones.²²

PRACTICE: Tonglen Through the Three Hearts

Drawing on Pemā Chödrön's tonglen practice and Joanna Macy's "Breathing Through"

This practice brings the three-heart framework into direct contact with the world's suffering. It is offered as a somatic integration of the map: not as a concept to understand but as a lived movement to try.

Pemā Chödrön's tonglen²⁵ — a Tibetan practice of taking in suffering and sending out spaciousness — works against the instinct to protect the self from pain. Joanna Macy's "Breathing Through"³ extends this toward ecological grief: breathing in the pain of the living world, breathing out relief, allowing the body to become a channel rather than a container. What neither practice fully maps is the somatic question: through which heart does the suffering move? This practice adds that dimension.

Preparation

Sit comfortably. Allow the breath to settle. Take a moment to locate all three centres somatically: Left chest: your personal self, tender and particular, your history, loves, grief. Right chest: the faint ground of I Am — not a place to locate but a direction to soften toward. Prior, untouched. There may be something here. We are not insisting. Centre: the warmth between them, where personal and vast meet. Begin with the gratitude orientation: place the hands together briefly. Feel the warmth. Feel the completeness of both the separate, the whole and the soul being here. Let that ground the practice.

Breathing in

Bring to mind a being, a place, a community carrying suffering right now. It may be someone close, or the coral reef, or a forest, or the collective field of human fear you have been feeling in your own chest. As you breathe in, allow that suffering to enter — not through the left chest alone, where it can overwhelm, but consciously through the right side first: into the vast, untouched ground that has no edge to be flooded. Let it arrive into the impersonal awareness that can hold everything

without being destroyed by it. Then let it move naturally to the centre — where it is felt with warmth, with genuine care, with the left heart's specific tenderness — but held in the larger ground.

Breathing out

From the centre — from the warmth between personal and vast — breathe out spaciousness. Not relief manufactured by the will, but what naturally arises when suffering is held in ground large enough to contain it: a quality of there is room for this, you are not alone in this, the ground holds this too. Let the out-breath carry that quality outward toward the being or place you called to mind.

The key somatic distinction

The difference between this practice and ordinary empathic absorption is the routing. When suffering enters only through the left chest — the personal, bounded heart — it accumulates. The heart fills. Compassion fatigue follows. When suffering is received first through the right — through the vast impersonal ground the seat of the I felt sense— and then met with warmth at the centre, it moves through rather than accumulating. The channel remains open. The separate self is genuinely moved, genuinely touched, without being flooded. This is what Macy points toward when she speaks of the heart that can hold the whole universe: not a heart broken open by catastrophe, but one that has softened enough to let the flow move through it again — a precise somatic description of what becomes possible when the left heart willingly yields to the larger ground.

Three to five minutes is sufficient to begin. Close as you began: hands together, warmth felt, the completeness of both being here. Let any gratitude that arises be received as information: the channel is open, the practice landed. A note for those with trauma history: if attending to the chest area brings distress or dissociation, please do not push through alone. This kind of interior attention is best supported by a skilled somatic practitioner.

The Chi Dimension: Where Attention Goes, Energy Follows

The classical Taoist and Chinese medicine principle — *yi dao, qi dao*¹¹ — states simply: where intention goes, chi follows. This principle, foundational to acupuncture, qigong, and all internal martial arts, offers a practical framework that is immediately testable in one's own body, whatever one's view of its ultimate nature.

If attention habitually lives in the head — during prolonged analytical processing, extended use of electronic media, hypervigilance, or the general misplacement of the I into the head— felt energy accumulates above. The result maps onto what Traditional Chinese Medicine describes as excess yang in the upper burner: overthinking that cannot stop, heat, agitation, inability to ground.

When attention pools in a wounded left chest, that wound occupies not just psychological but felt-energetic territory. The centre chest corresponds in Taoist internal cultivation to the middle dan tian¹² — the middle elixir field, governing shen: the quality of spirit-consciousness that determines how others feel in one's presence, whether people settle or agitate in one's field. The middle dan tian is where Dé/Te is felt as chi. When it is balanced, full and open, the field that radiates from a person tends to be coherent, stabilising, transmissive. When it is wounded, unbalanced or depleted, something unsettled moves in the room before a word is spoken.

In this model, when attention is gently placed in the right side of the chest — in that faint centre of gravity where the I Am has its root — felt energy tends to follow. The

upper accumulation redistributes downward. The thinker stops grasping at the world. Not through effort but through the soft calling-home of directed attention. This is not physics in the mechanistic sense; it is phenomenological observation of how felt aliveness organises itself when the I finds a lower, more grounded home. This aligns with the biological understanding that the body builds itself from the ground up — the brain is the last development, resting on a foundation of organs, tissue, and soma that were there long before the head learned to think.

What Happens When the Centre is Wounded

There is a specific vulnerability that contemplative and therapeutic traditions have not yet adequately mapped: what happens when the centre is struck at the moment of maximum openness, as in the personal experience outlined at the beginning of this article.

In states of genuine contemplative opening — what Zen calls kensho — the heart centre is fully open and coherent. This is also the moment of maximum vulnerability. A sudden shock — verbal violence, energetic intrusion, acute relational rupture — landing at this threshold may go directly into the open centre. There is no ego armour to deflect it. The wound lands at the precise point through which Dé/Te flows.

What follows is offered from personal experience as a somatic observation, not a clinical category with established criteria. The centre contracts. Chi stagnates. Dé/Te cannot move freely. The left heart carries the impact and becomes the dominant processing channel. The right side goes unvisited. Felt energy accumulates above, the thinker takes over, the middle dan tian empties. The world goes dark — not metaphorically but perceptually — because the organ of coherent perception has closed. The path back is not to force it open. It is to warm it — from the right, from community, from the patient ground that does not require the left heart to be stronger than it is.

What follows in the account of the author is a prolonged period of left-dominant processing: the wounded personal heart attempting to heal through thinking, through psychological work, through spiritual practice — all routed through the very channel that was struck. Trauma research¹³ consistently shows that healing is often blocked when it must pass through the same channel as the wound. Something structurally different is needed.

The right side — the seat of the I Am prior to personal content — may be structurally untouched by this kind of wound. Because a relational wound goes for the personal heart. Because impersonal awareness has no personal surface for a wound to land on. This makes it a natural resourcing point: not more thinking, not more processing through the left, but gentle curious attention to the right — allowing the impersonal ground to quietly meet the wounded centre from a place that was never struck.

Gendlin's Focusing¹⁴ — attending to the pre-conceptual bodily knowing that precedes language — provides perhaps the most precise somatic method for this arrival. The instruction to place attention gently, with curiosity rather than agenda, and wait for

what is actually there, is the felt sense method applied to interior cardiac geography. The Hakomi method¹⁵ offers a closely related entry through assisted mindful self-study.

Over time, as right-side awareness becomes more familiar and felt energy builds there through consistent attention, the centre tends to reopen — not dramatically, but as a gradual restoration of warmth and coherence. Dé/Te begins to move again. The world begins to look alive.

The Outward Face: Meeting the World

The right heart has an inward function — grounding the thinker, resourcing the wounded center. But it also has an outward face essential for ecological service.

The left heart opens toward the particular: this person, this loss, this tree, this child. The right heart opens toward the whole — the living web that holds all particular things. These are not competing orientations. They are complementary. And the outward face of the right heart takes several distinct forms.

Felt Continuity with the Living World

When felt sense attention rests in the right side, something becomes available that the left heart tends not to reach through effort alone: a somatic felt sense of continuity with the more-than-human world¹⁶. Not the idea of interconnection. Not ecological philosophy. But the forest as body. The watershed as nervous system. The mycelial network as something actually felt beneath attention rather than intellectually appreciated above it.

Wild nature offers a field in which referential thinking has no purchase. The trees sway without commentary. The wildness simply is, without comparison or hierarchy. In that presence, the I that has been exhausting itself through self-concept finds nothing left to push against — and may quietly return home. This is why extended time in nature works at a depth that other resourcing often cannot reach. It is not only biophilic restoration. It is a structurally non-referential field, which complements one's natural state.

David Abram's¹⁶ phenomenological work describes the reciprocal, participatory nature of perception when attention is not captured by internal monologue — exactly the quality that becomes available when the thinker quiets in the right side. McGilchrist⁵ argues at civilisational scale that left-hemisphere dominance has progressively severed the felt connection to the living world by reducing it to a collection of resources. The right chest as somatic access point to felt interconnection is not merely personal practice. It is a response to a civilisational pathology.

The Facilitator's Somatic Ground

HeartMath research^{9,10} has documented that coherent emotional states generate ordered electromagnetic field patterns that measurably influence surrounding nervous systems. In group settings, what tends to generate coherence in a facilitator is not emotional intensity from the left, but the spacious warm stillness of the centre held between left and right.

The right heart does not transmit feeling in the way the left heart does. It transmits impersonal ground. And ground — the sense of vast unshakeable spaciousness beneath the grief — is precisely what a grief circle most needs in order to go deep without going under. The facilitator who has found and can consistently inhabit the centre — personal warmth and impersonal spaciousness in honest relationship — does not need to manage the group’s emotional field. The field organises itself. What is being offered is not technique but presence: the middle dan tian open, Dé/Te flowing, the room becoming, without announcement, a held space.

IFS¹⁷ speaks of Self energy — the compassionate, curious, calm witnessing presence that holds all parts without being captured by them. The right side of the chest, in this somatic framework, may be the body’s natural access point to that Self energy. Arriving there before and during sessions may support the practitioner’s capacity to remain Self-led rather than part-led.

A gentle question worth sitting with: in any framework that works with parts, sub-personalities, or inner voices, what is the nature of the one doing the organising? If the Self that holds the parts is itself a refined and compassionate construction of the thinking mind — a wiser manager rather than a genuinely different register of being — then the framework may produce a more spacious and self-aware thinker without touching what is prior to thinking altogether.

This is not a criticism of IFS, whose gifts for making the inner life navigable and compassionate are real and well-documented. It is a somatic question: the right heart points toward a quality of presence that is not a better relationship between the I and its parts, but the discovery of what was never a part at all. That distinction — between a more coherent thinker and the ground beneath thinking — may matter most in the deepest work.

A similar gentle question arises in relation to the decision-science tradition. Kahneman’s System 1 and System 2,¹⁹ and the “libertarian paternalism” of Thaler and Sunstein’s nudging framework,²⁰ represent genuine contributions to understanding how humans make choices. And yet — from the vantage of this somatic map — both remain primarily within the territory of thought examining thought. The slow thinker watches the fast thinker. The choice architect nudges the decision-maker. The frame moves but the framer does not.

Zungenbrecher — Tongue Twister

Original German (traditional Zungenbrecher, attributed to W. Hoffmann, Königsberg, 1942)

*Denke nie gedacht zu haben,
denn das Denken der Gedanken
ist gedankenloses Denken.
Denn wenn du denkst, du denkst,
dann denkst du nur, du denkst,
aber richtig denken tust du nie.*

English translation

Never think to have thought,

*for the thinking of thoughts
is thoughtless thinking.
For when you think you think,
then you only think you think,
but real thinking you never do.*

The body's knowing — what Gendlin called the felt sense, what this framework locates in the right chest and the warm centre — is not a slower or faster version of the same instrument. It is a different instrument entirely. One that indigenous elders across traditions have described not as the absence of thinking but placing thinking as the rightful servant: thought in service of felt ground, rather than thought attempting to organise what only ground can hold.

Both IFS and the decision-science tradition are offered here not as failures but as maps drawn from within the territory of mind — maps that are genuinely useful, and that become most useful when the traveller knows where the map ends and the unmapped country begins. Soul can only be transmitted directly, through nature, or through poetry music and generally other. This article itself is therefore only an invitation: it depends on the right ground in which to land.

Story, Myth, and Poetry as Right-Heart Vehicles

Personal narrative lives in the left heart: my story, my loss, my grief. Something different happens when story expands into myth, poetry, or deep ecological address. These forms do not simply convey information about interconnection — they enact it somatically.

Martin Shaw's¹⁸ work describes the power of traditional story as speaking from below the personal, from the dreaming depth of the land itself. Joanna Macy's Council of All Beings³ works through the same mechanism: participants speak not as themselves but as the mountain, the river, the wolf. The personal perspective is temporarily vacated and the more-than-human ground is given voice. The right heart, in this map, is where that larger frame is felt in the body rather than grasped by the mind.

A Note on the Separate Self

One of the significant dangers in nondual and transpersonal traditions is the implicit devaluing of the separate self — the suggestion that the personal human being is something to be transcended or dissolved. This framework suggests the opposite.

The separate self is the instrument through which Dé/Te touches the world. Without it, there is no one to feel the moss underfoot, no one to sit with a dying person, no one to grieve the forest. The left heart is not the obstacle to genuine service. It is half of what makes it possible.

The Tao Te Ching does not ask the sage to dissolve. It asks the sage to become like water⁷ — fully present, taking the shape of what it meets, finding the lowest place, wearing away stone through persistence and contact. Water is entirely itself. It does not pretend to be the ocean. And yet the ocean moves through it.

The art is not transcendence of the personal self but its full inhabiting — alongside equal familiarity with the impersonal ground. Left and right. Human and vast. Chi moving freely between them. Dé/Te — soul — arising naturally from their meeting. This is, in Plotkin's developmental language⁸, the work of the Artisan of the Wild Orchard: not the first wild encounter with soul, but the long craft of letting soul move through one's particular form without obstruction.

What this framework describes is not the journey from fool to sage, as if one must be left behind for the other to arrive. It is the journey toward their unification — the fool becoming malleable enough to let wisdom lead, without giving up its own tenderness. The left heart does not need to break in order to open. It needs to soften: to trust, gradually and with support, that the right heart is not its replacement but its companion. The fool does not retire. It hands over the weight of exclusive responsibility — the exhausting belief that it must carry the world alone — and finds that in doing so it can love more freely. The sage, grounded in the warmth of the centre, can act with more precision. From their meeting, something becomes possible that neither alone could manage: effortless movement between the personal and the impersonal, between grief and ground, between the deeply human and the vastly more-than-human. This is the malleable soul: fully itself, fully present, fully rooted in the world — and no longer alone in what it carries.

An Invitation to Research

This framework is experiential in origin. It emerged not from literature review but from lived somatic investigation during a period of deep descent and recovery. Several adjacent bodies of research — cardiac neuroscience, hemisphere lateralisation, compassion research, contemplative phenomenology, traditional Chinese medicine — provide partial support for individual elements. The integrated framework has not yet been directly studied.

A possible research question: Does somatic orientation toward right-cardiac awareness, as a complement to left-dominant empathic processing, reduce compassion fatigue markers and increase sustainable facilitation capacity in ecological grief work?

Klimecki and Singer's² distinction between empathic distress and compassionate concern suggests a testable hypothesis: that facilitation held from the right heart and centre would show the neurophysiological signature of compassionate concern — approach-oriented, warm, non-depleting — rather than the stress-system activation characteristic of empathic distress. Collaboration with researchers in cardiac neuroscience, contemplative psychology, and traditional Chinese medicine is warmly welcomed.

PRACTICE: Baron Ferson's Fearsome Stance

A standing Qigong practice from the lineage of John P. Milton — first ecologist on staff at the White House and co-founder of Friends of the Earth. Best practised in wild or semi-wild nature.

*Begin with three minutes; extend gradually to ten or more as the body becomes familiar with the flow.*²³

The Stance

Stand outdoors — in wild nature if at all possible. Place your feet shoulder-width apart. Allow the knees to soften slightly. Let the pelvis release downward, as if the tailbone is gently drawn toward the earth. Feel the soles of both feet in full contact with the ground beneath you.

See if you can let a smile arise at the edges of the eyes and let that smile travel through the whole body, maybe bringing a smile to the corners of the mouth. Milton points out that it is easier to smile than to frown.

A fine thread of awareness rises from the crown of the head toward the sky, lengthening the spine without effort or rigidity. Eyes are open — taking in the full surrounding field, the felt interconnectedness of everything present.

Allow both arms to float slightly away from the body, forming a gentle, relaxed curve — held not by effort but by the body's own ease. The left palm faces upward or slightly inward, open and receptive. The right palm faces downward, softly releasing toward the earth.

The Flow

Visualise — or simply intend — a column of Qi descending from the heavens into the open left palm and up through the left arm, entering the body. Qi moves through the whole body: through the limbs, the organs, the field of felt aliveness that runs beneath conscious attention.

As a soft accompaniment, attention may gently follow the Qi as it passes through the Left Heart — the personal, feeling self — meets the Centre, where warmth arises between personal and vast, and then moves through the Right Heart, where awareness rests as open ground. This is not a forced sequence. It is an invitation: the Qi circulates through the whole body; the three heart centres are simply natural waypoints along its path.

Whatever the body does not need — all blockages, all that has been held and is ready to move — releases downward from the right palm in a second column of Qi, flowing into Mother Earth. As John P. Milton would say: the Earth receives it all and transforms it into beautiful compost. Nothing is wasted. Nothing harmful remains. The ground takes what is given and makes it fertile.

Closing the Practice

Always close with the Diamond Mudra of Integration. Intend the accumulated Qi to settle safely in the Lower Dan Tien — the lower elixir field, the body's deep reservoir of life force.

Find the Lower Dan Tien — approximately three fingers' width below the navel, and 1–2 cm inward into the body: a small gathering point, like a pebble held warmly in the belly, which may deepen with continued practice. Place the fingertips gently against the abdomen at this point. Form a clear upward-pointing triangle with the joined thumbs above, and a downward-pointing triangle with the joined little fingers below — the two triangles together forming a diamond shape held before the lower belly. Feel the Qi connection between the Lao Gong points at the centre of each palm and the Lower Dan

Tien. Breathe softly. Allow the Qi to stabilise, integrate, and harmonise — body, energy, mind, and spirit settling into wholeness. Hold for a few breaths, then release gently.

After practice, move through Bear Qigong to smooth the energy and release any tension in the arms and shoulders — or simply shake and sway the body gently, letting it settle in its own time.

Tips

- Relax everywhere possible — especially the shoulders and elbows — while maintaining the stance.
- Always greet the beings of the wild with a natural sense of gratitude before the practice, and thank the beings afterwards, as not to apply an extractive way of relating.
- Remember to drink water after the practice.
- The spirit of the practice is light and cheerful — open, not rigid. This is not a demanding discipline; it is a natural meeting with the living field.
- Suitable for all levels of entry into Qigong. Start with two to three minutes and let the body teach the appropriate duration over time.

After John P. Milton's Sacred Passage and Way of Nature work.²³

Closing: What the Body Already Knows

Return for a moment to what you felt in the exercises above — whether the warmth between the hands, the faint resonance in the right chest, or the quieting of the head when the I found its way down. Balanced between the personal left and the impersonal right, the centre may emit a warmth experienced as Dé/Te. Not sentiment. Not spiritual concept. The living transmission of the whole through this particular form, in this particular moment — felt as warmth in the centre of the chest, as felt aliveness gathering where Tao and the human meet, as soul arising from their contact.

This is also what softens in grief and does not close again. The left heart need not crack to open — it needs to yield. To release, willingly, what it has been holding in isolation: the full weight of the world carried as a personal burden. When it does, the fool hands over to the sage — and finds that the sage has been waiting patiently the whole time. The centre opens not through fracture but through a restoration of flow. What remains, when that yielding is complete, is not the personal heart made larger. It is Dé/Te: what Joanna Macy points at when she speaks of the heart that can hold the whole universe — the particular human life become a clear channel for something that was always vaster than it.

That — held in the centre of the chest, between left and right, with felt aliveness moving freely through the whole — is the sustainable channel through which the world's grief can move, and through which genuine ecological service becomes possible without diminishing, fragmenting, or exhausting the one who serves — because the one who serves is no longer carrying it alone.

The body has always known this. We are only now finding the words.

The Fool's journey does not end when the right heart is found. It ends — if it ends — when the left and right heart have been meeting long enough that the warmth between them becomes the natural ground from which service arises. This is not a destination that arrives in a single practice session or a single reading of an article. It arrives the way the dawn arrives: not because you summoned it, but because you were present through the night. There will be grief along the way. There will be contraction, confusion, and moments when the right chest is entirely silent and the old overwhelm returns. This is the journey. Not its failure. And it is a journey best made with others — with a skilled practitioner alongside, with community, with the ritual containers that Weller and Macy have spent lifetimes building. What this article offers is not a path. It is a direction. The path is yours, and it will take the time it takes.

The goal of this journey is not to leave the left heart behind. It is not to transcend the fool, to dissolve the personal, or to arrive in the serene detachment of the right. What is being pointed at is something more liveable and more whole: the capacity to move effortlessly between the personal and the impersonal — between the tender, grief-bearing fool and the quiet, witnessing sage — and to find that they are not opposites but partners. The left heart does not hand its keys to the right and retire. It hands over the weight of exclusive responsibility — the exhausting belief that it must carry the world alone — and discovers that in doing so, it becomes more fully itself. The fool, freed from the burden of being the only one awake in the room, can love more freely. The sage, grounded in the warmth of the centre, can act with more precision. Together, held in a body that knows how to move between them, they become what the alchemical traditions called the *conjunctio*: not one thing dissolved into another, but two natures unified without either being lost. This is the malleable soul — rooted in the world, moved by the world, and not destroyed by it.

There is one more thing the journey asks us to consider — and it is perhaps the most counterintuitive of all. The contraction you meet in the left heart: the shame, the grief that will not move, the place that closes and will not open on command — is not an obstacle to the journey. Thomas Hübl, in his work on collective and ancestral trauma, offers a formulation that points directly here: nothing is in the way. It is the way.

The body that contracts, the heart that closes, the emotion that will not release on demand — these are not failures of practice. They are the practice. What the body holds back may be exactly what is ripening. Trauma and contraction, understood in this light, are not the enemy of integration but its slow and patient teacher — holding something in trust until the conditions are right, until enough warmth has gathered in the centre, until the ground is safe enough to bear the weight of what was too large to be carried before.

In the author's own experience, the quality that resisted most — shame — turned out to carry the most specific and irreplaceable gift. Shame is the guardian of exposure: it holds the tender, unformed parts of the self from a world not yet safe enough to receive them. Allowed to remain exactly as it is — without being bypassed or dissolved in spiritual light — shame becomes a form of discernment. It is what prevented a certain kind of premature opening: the wide, unguarded openness of the "enlightened fool" who has glimpsed the right heart but has not yet integrated the wisdom of the left. The fool without shame gives everything away. The person who has honoured their shame knows

what to offer, to whom, and when. In this sense, shame was not the last obstacle. It was a final teacher — and perhaps the most important protection along the way.

If you carry something in the body that will not move: trust it. It may be holding back your greatest gift, waiting for the right moment to ripen. The contraction knows what it is doing. Your task is not to force it open, but to create enough warmth, enough ground, space and enough community — until opening becomes safe rather than demanded.

A final word — borrowed from Harrison Owen, inventor of Open Space Technology, a method this author draws on in facilitation work: “I am just a storyteller. Don’t believe anything I say.” This article is not asking to be believed. It is asking to be felt.

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