

THE SUFI PRACTICE FOR HEALING YOUR HEART

A CRISIS IN THE LIFE OF A
CARDIOLOGIST OPENS HIM
TO THE MIRACULOUS
POWER OF AN ANCIENT
CURE FOR THE HEART.

By KIRK LAMAN



I know something is wrong with my heart. I can feel it here,” Sandra said, massaging the center of her chest. Sandra was a slender 25-year-old with dark, shoulder-length hair. Perched on my examining table, she was restless and uncomfortable. She scanned me with yearning eyes, and I could hear a subtle tremor in her voice. “There’s got to be something wrong to make me feel this way.”

After examining and talking to Sandra, I was sure that something was indeed wrong with her heart, but the issue was more emotional than physical. I wasn’t sure whether she was willing to look beyond conventional treatment for the deeper healing she needed.

Illustration by SAM WEBER





had gone through the traditional training for physicians, becoming a typical science-driven cardiologist with a conventional practice, relying on routine testing, drugs, and surgery. But in the eighties a personal crisis changed my understanding of both illness and healing. In addressing my own heart problems, I began to explore alternative medicine. After many years of study, I concluded that healing is only effective if it addresses body, mind, and spirit, and I realized I needed additional training to help those whose hearts are broken.

During my personal transformation, I was introduced to the mystical path of Sufism, an ancient spiritual practice originating in Islam, best known in the West through the poetry of Rumi. What interested me was its focus on the heart and its many practical and effective methods of healing. I was particularly struck by a time-honored technique called Practicing Remembrance, a simple but miraculous way of opening a person to the healing rays of love.

I embraced the Sufi Path of Love. A decade later, the titles of Sufi teacher and Master Sufi Healer were conferred upon me by my teacher, Shaykh Muhammad al-Jamal of Jerusalem. I now had the skills to help others in their own healing journeys. But they had to be open to the process.

After listening carefully to Sandra's problem, I asked her whether she was willing to explore alternative means of healing such as meditation, prayer, or psychotherapy. I invited her to a weekend workshop that I offer to patients interested in improving their emotional heart health. Apprehension flashed in her eyes, but she said, "I'll do anything if it will work."

Two weeks later, I opened the workshop with a guided meditation to get people in touch with their hearts. During the meditation, I walked back to where Sandra was seated. Her face was contorted in pain. When I checked on her later, after teaching the Practicing Remembrance technique, she was sobbing. She confided that childhood memories were aggravating her fear and anxiety. I spent some time helping her go deeper into the Sufi technique. Miraculously, by the end of the workshop, her face had brightened and she seemed transformed.

"I feel fabulous," she told me. "My heart feels so much lighter and more peaceful. It's hard to believe I could get better so quickly." I urged her to keep practicing. When I saw her again three months later, she reported that the chest pain had vanished. I wasn't surprised. Over so many years, I had found that teaching the Sufi technique of Practicing Remembrance could move people quickly toward healing their hearts — on the psychological, spiritual, and physical levels.

A SECOND OPINION FOR PRACTICE

Ed came to me because one of his mitral heart valves had a severe leakage. Two other cardiologists had recommended surgery, which Ed hoped to avoid. He decided to take my seminar to learn Practicing Remembrance and used the techniques faithfully for six months. Not only did his valve function improve dramatically, allowing him to avoid surgery, but the emotional issues that had plagued his heart resolved in the process.

I witnessed another dramatic recovery while treating a woman named Andrea. As a child she had endured an abusive, alcoholic stepfather while helping her mother raise her many sisters. She also suffered through a long marriage to an abusive husband while raising five children. Meanwhile, her health had deteriorated and her weight, like her life, was out of control.

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After observing Andrea and listening to her story of deep sadness and loss, I was convinced that she suffered from a broken heart. By broken, I mean a heart that is not just sad but tormented by life's difficulties and pains — repeated physical or emotional abuse, intense loneliness, sudden tragedy. Such a heart carries wounds that alter normal functioning on every level. People often don't realize that their heavy-heartedness influences their health. They may be in denial about the depth of their distress.

Intense anger, sadness, fear, loneliness, despair, grief — if left unchecked — can create the environment for illness. I believe they can lead to the kinds of heart conditions and diseases that I treat every day. A growing body of medical research has borne this out. Ongoing studies of depression and anxiety have been linked to the development of heart disease, and some have shown that they are risk factors equal to high cholesterol and diabetes. Research shows that patients with depression are twice as likely to die from the complications of a heart attack, compared with people who don't have depression.

Dean Ornish, M.D., a respected cardiologist from the University of California at San Francisco, documents hundreds of these studies that illustrate a direct connection between illness and lack of love in his book, *Love and Survival*. This research illustrates that people who are alone and friendless are sick more often, with greater incidence of heart disease and stroke and a shorter life expectancy, than those blessed with a wide circle of friends and support.

Citing this body of evidence, some experts suggest that depression and anxiety should be classified as new risk factors for the development of heart disease. Of course, none of this diminishes the amazing implications of recent medical and technological advances that attack problems on the physical level. In the past few years, for example, scientists have discovered that inflammation of the coronary arteries plays a role in the arteries becoming clogged with cholesterol. Two of the most successful heart medications, beta-blockers and ACE inhibitors, work at the hormonal level, reducing the influence of adrenaline released when we are upset, nervous, stressed, or frightened. These drugs have been nothing short of miraculous, reducing incidence of death by 30 percent.

But, like a growing number of clinical physicians, I have seen many patients like Andrea who don't respond well to drugs alone because of emotional as well as physical ailments. Fortunately, Andrea did open her heart to love and healing through a daily practice of Remembrance over many months. Over time, she reported that the heaviness and pain in her heart were lifting. At her final appointment, six months later, I was startled by her broad smile and bright eyes — her countenance was completely different from the first time I had met her.

"How's your chest pain?" I inquired.

"It's gone," she said, her face aglow. "Completely gone. I can't tell you how much better I feel."

S&H

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PRACTICING REMEMBRANCE

Practicing Remembrance is an ancient method that uses a combination of breath and sound to open the heart to greater love. What we are remembering when we utilize the technique is love.

In many spiritual traditions, love and God are interchangeable. For Sufis, the Practice of Remembrance is to repeat a name for God over and over. Each time the name for God is repeated, love flows into the heart. It is this continual cleansing of the heart that is so powerful. Although Sufis use the name "Allah" when performing Remembrance in this fashion, I suggest that non-Muslims use the sound "Aaaaahhh," the sound of deep relaxation made by exhaling. But it is important to visualize love or the spirit entering the heart when repeating the sound.

Ideally, Practicing Remembrance should be learned from an authorized teacher, but you can get a feel for the technique by following these instructions:

- Set aside a minimum of 15 minutes for the initial practice.
- Have a set of meditation beads or a necklace with about 100 beads that move easily. (See "Bead Here Now," page 62.) These are used to focus the mind and to keep you from being distracted by the clock.
- Sit in a chair that is supportive but not so comfortable that it makes you sleepy. Place your beads in your right hand for counting, and place your left hand over your heart.
- Breathe in through the nose and exhale through the mouth saying, "Aaaaahhh," or, if you feel comfortable with the word, say "Allaaaahh." With your left hand, you should be able to feel the sound resonate in the region of the heart.
- Continue inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth for 500 repetitions.

Practicing Remembrance with a teacher and others is a more powerful experience — magnified by the ocean of group sound — but this exercise will give you a taste of what is possible.

S&H HEAL YOUR HEART WORKSHOPS

Join Kirk Laman and the S&H community for our "Heal Your Heart" workshop at Miriam's Well, May 18–20, in Saugerties, New York, and June 1–3 at The Crossings in Austin, Texas. Dr. Laman will introduce participants to the Sufi way of connecting with that inner knowing that lives in your heart and is uniquely yours. At the same time, you'll benefit from the power of the group. People of all faiths and traditions are encouraged to attend. For other dates, more information, and registration call 845-246-5805 or go to: SpiritualityHealth.com/SufiWorkshop.