

Meditation Retreat, Check! Now What?

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A meditation retreat can energize and invigorate you for days, weeks, and even months afterward. Whether you were looking for a psychological reset or a means to push yourself to a deeper level of awareness, after finishing a retreat, you may feel impelled to do more. “I feel inspired,” is a natural thought. “Now what?”

Having been in that position and done some seeking on my own, I do have an immediate and obvious answer: meditate every day. Establishing a daily practice, if you haven’t already done so, is the first step. Once you commit to a daily practice, however, there are some surprisingly simple things that can be done to take your spiritual practice deeper.

In the past 50 years, meditation has come a long way from its Buddhist origins to the mainstream wellness staple it has become in the United States. We learn it from apps and streaming videos, or in person through local community-based groups. There have been countless articles and books written from anecdotal and scientific perspectives heralding meditation for its ability to relieve stress and promote good mental health. But in most cases we learn to do it in an environment stripped of most (if not all) of its Buddhist context. While that is not directly negative, it can lead us to neglect other tools that are essential for spiritual and psychological growth.

Fundamentally, meditation is a tool for cultivating awareness towards the liberation from suffering. And as with any tool, it can be useful in many contexts, but it is best used in the context for which it was specifically designed. In the case of meditation, that context includes the wisdom which sustains your world view, the ethics that cultivate constructive action, and the self-sustainable effort to focus that action towards the goal of freedom. In Buddhism, these aspects of context are portions of The Noble Eightfold Path (Wise View, Intention, Speech, Action, Livelihood, Effort, Mindfulness, and Concentration).

I am not going to outline The Eightfold Path. It has already been done in greater detail, and in a more articulate manner than I am capable of from the basis of my limited study. I encourage readers to seek out their own texts or teachers for a deep dive. What I offer here is an accessible primer to a Buddhist-ish (more cleverly known as “Buddhish”) context to use as a supplement to your daily meditation practice.

Address Your Worldview

You may be surprised to discover how difficult it is to describe your worldview. What is the natural order to the world, and how does that shape existence? Do you see the world as a paradise, and human nature as naturally generous and honest, or does it seem more realistic that we all live in a harsh environment, and people are only looking out for themselves? Maybe your view is something in-between, but can you explain it with three sentences? My first suggestion is to do exactly that: write down the basics of your worldview in three sentences or less, trying to be as honest as possible (nobody has to see it but you!).

It's okay if you're cynical about human beings and their true motivations. It's also okay if you are optimistic to an eye-rolling degree of cheesy. However you feel is how your individual experience has shaped you. It doesn't define you as a person forever and always, and there aren't any objectively "good" or "bad" perspectives. The point is to get your genuine worldview formulated. Once it is there on paper in front of you, think about how it resonates with you. Is that the worldview that you want? If you would prefer it to be different, what would you change? Why? Do you even think it's possible to change your worldview?

I'm aware this suggestion sounds very much like a self-help workbook exercise, but it is important to consciously bring your worldview forward for consideration, and to continue to check-in with it. As your practice deepens, new perceptions may open up and alter the way in which you perceive the world around you. You may come to relate differently with friends, family, and others around you. It's a given that your worldview deeply affects your psychology. Understanding why it is the way it is, as well as where you want it to be, will help keep you grounded and connected with who you are as you navigate the challenges of your day-to-day life.

Contemplate Your Ethics

In a similar way to worldview, it is easy to take ethics for granted. We can believe ourselves to be "basically a good person" without ever thinking deeply about the specific ways we are "good" or what that behavior may or may not look like. We could also see ourselves as occasionally or frequently "bad" or in a "grey area," but believing that our actions are typically justified by good intentions, even if we haven't actually fully thought out how or why that has been the case. It is not uncommon to lurk in the area of vibes or feelings when it comes to ethics, because most of the time we feel like we know whether something is right or wrong as it arises. Unfortunately there can be undesirable consequences to persisting with this approach.

Since it lacks intentionality, vibe-based ethics allows for the build-up of unresolved feelings: confusion, guilt, regret, shame, and a host of other destructive mind states, can exist within us both consciously and unconsciously. Trying to live a happy life with unresolved baggage can be difficult under normal circumstances—even when you're distracted with day-to-day living. It becomes even more difficult to cope with the emotional repercussions of the past as you

attempt to sit with yourself in meditation. This is something you may be familiar with: as you are quietly trying to follow your own breath, your mind often finds your self to be the most appealing target of negativity.

To mitigate your mind's judgemental narrative, it's a good strategy to avoid collecting more ammunition for it. Since it's impossible for your mind to beat you up over wise decisions, you can only feel better about yourself when you know that you have acted ethically. Ethical action can be perceived as selfish in this respect, and that is perfectly acceptable. By establishing your ethics as an intention, you cultivate your own peace of mind. Establishing a code of conduct, and using it to intentionally shape your behavior, not only builds confidence with the reinforcing notion that you are an ethical being, but also diminishes the negative leverage of your inner narrative. This is good for you, as mentioned, but it has the added benefit of also being a positive force for all beings around you.

If you want a place to start with for establishing your ethical code, I recommend Buddhism's Five Precepts which I have adopted for myself: Refrain from 1) killing, 2) stealing, 3) harmful speech (e.g. lying and gossip), 4) sexual misconduct, 5) intoxication.

While there are always nuances to ethical behavior, the five precepts are more or less self-explanatory, and I won't go into further detail about them. It is more important that you as an individual believe strongly in your personal ethics than it is to understand my personal approach. As you did with worldview, write your ethical code down and think about it, then stick to it even when it is difficult. Remember that you will still make mistakes and step outside of it at times, and that you may need to revise your code as you learn what is reasonable and makes you feel most like an ethical being.

Bring Mindfulness Into Your Work

Having completed a retreat, mindfulness both on and off the cushion seems to come easier—at least while in relative silence and seclusion. Bringing that same level of mindfulness to your regular day-to-day life, however, is a significantly more challenging task. Often the ease in which we quieted our minds while on retreat quickly slips away under the stress of our regular routine.

When returning from retreat, it is easy to default to using mindfulness in a prescriptive way. That is to say, to address your personal and professional life in more or less the same manner you always have, while reserving mindfulness for the cushion as a form of decompression, as a reset from the inevitable stresses of work and relationships. Prescriptive mindfulness is not a bad approach by any means, but the ultimate goal is for mindfulness to inform *all* aspects of our daily life, and so we want to move beyond it existing as a refuge. We want it to be the place in which we always dwell.

For most of us, the majority of the waking hours available to us are spent working. It is virtually automatic: carry out the same or similar tasks as the day before, interact with the same people

in the same way, take our breaks at the same time in the same manner. This kind of repetition can at times be a comfort, and at other times become so maddening we become desperate for change. In both of those extremes we can become ensnared by negative mind states.

Consider walking meditation: within the practice, we are essentially pacing back and forth again and again, walking the same patch of ground over and over only to stop, turn around, and walk it again. It is not difficult to become bored or frustrated. But at retreat we practice this mindfully, and so it becomes compelling how deeply we experience such a menial and repetitive task. In actuality, each step is different from the previous in nuanced ways: we notice a ladybug in our path, and in altering our trajectory to avoid it, we step on an acorn we didn't know was there a moment ago—the experience looks, sounds, smells, and feels unique at every instant. We can apply that same mindfulness to our work—all day, every day—and it can be surprising how it enlivens each task, increases our focus, and deepens how we relate with our co-workers.

Of course our work is nothing like walking. At work it is easy to get distracted by mistakes, last-minute changes, cranky over-caffeinated bosses, and looming deadlines. There are endless things to derail us from, or demand of, our attention. Lucky for us, coping with changing circumstances is exactly what we are training to do on the cushion (and why daily practice is essential!). Wherever we are, we can return to our breath, return to our awareness of sensation, and remain cognizant of our changing mental states. We can begin again every time we realize we have strayed from mindfulness. And in fact, stress, and particularly the persisting and regularly occurring type of stress that we encounter while doing our work, can serve as a fantastic reminder. Whenever you start to feel overwhelmed or irritable, try to recognize it as a warning sign that you should return to your breath. The more you cultivate that habit, the easier it becomes to not stray from mindfulness. In doing that every day, your work becomes part of your practice, and you can begin to better understand how every facet of your life can also become part of your practice.

Find Gratitude Every Day

It does seem like the type of generic platitude you might find framed on the wall in a truckstop diner, but sometimes sayings such as “find gratitude every day” become banal because so many individuals find truth in them. Gratitude is useful because it is literally impossible to experience resentment or discontent while feeling grateful for what you have. In devoting a small amount of time every day towards identifying things that make you grateful, you clear away a small corner in which you can take refuge from injustice, want, and the unfavorable circumstance that inevitably leads you to suffering. As you continue to acknowledge your gratitude, that corner space expands to leave less and less room for negativity and discontent. If nothing else, it also feels good and costs you nothing but a few minutes time.

That's It!

Address your world view, contemplate your ethics, bring mindfulness into your work, and find gratitude every day; if none of it seems terribly profound, it's because it's not. Strangely enough, it's the simple things—the things you already know that, deep down, you should already be doing—that you can most easily take for granted and forget to make a part of every day.