

The Effect Church

CONTEMPLATIVE EBOOK PART II



Contemplative Practice

You've probably heard the joke that it's not very encouraging that doctors call what they do "practice."

The joke is funny — if you thought so — because of how we mainly use the word practice these days: to repeatedly perform a behavior to improve or maintain a skill. Improvement may be the outcome, but practice is primarily physical activity as opposed to mental activity. It's the use of an idea, belief, or method beyond theories relating to it, as well as regular and habitual performance.

This is a critical distinction for us to make since we in the West so identify with our minds and intellect, we can miss the fact that some things only exist in motion, in the doing of them. We understand that when it comes to physical skills like riding a bike, playing a musical instrument, or speaking a second language, there is no substitute for physically repeating the action until our muscles remember or we're actually thinking in the new language—no longer mentally translating.

But when it comes to mental and spiritual health, we tend to think that concepts and ideas alone will take us where we want to go, that talking with therapist or counselor, pastor or priest, understanding psychological principles, emotional triggers, or theological concepts is the sum of the journey. It's only the very beginning.



Talk therapy or counseling of any kind is how we bring into our consciousness the issues we're really facing and see the door to new ways of living and relating. But until we put what we learn into physical practice and repeatedly apply it to daily life, we'll wonder why, with all our new insight, we don't feel better, why our relationships remain strained.

Until our muscles can remember what our minds have absorbed, nothing changes.

Mental & Spiritual are Still Physical

It may sound strange that mental and spiritual health would be attained and retained by physical practice, but as long as we're breathing here, it's all somatic. Our unconscious core beliefs — programs for survival and happiness put in place by the hurts and trauma experienced since childhood—are largely responsible for debilitating us and limiting our growth. Even as we become aware of them, they are not under conscious control and can't be directly dismantled through sheer will, but are indirectly bypassed as we practice new ways of behaving that will eventually become new ways of thinking.

This is why after all the truckloads of books written, hours and years of therapy engaged, worship sung and prayers prayed, mental and spiritual health remains elusive. Whether we call it cognitive behavioral therapy or faith (In the ancient sense of action taken in the presence of uncertainty) we must practice, walk through the new door to the path beyond if we want to get somewhere we've never been before.



The Five Elements

There are five elements that every human being needs in order to feel fulfilled in life, to have a sense of meaning, purpose, and identity. *Community, accountability, structure, discipline, and service.* When someone seeks therapy or counseling, it's a given that one, some, or all of these elements will be missing or compromised.

As human beings, we're wired to connect. Connection is our basic purpose in life, and we practice it in community. We all need a community of people around us in which to connect: family, work, school, social, religious, activity or cause-based, or all the above. But more than just being members of these groups, we need to be personally involved enough that we become accountable to others in the group. That is, that someone will miss us and call us if we're not there as we do for them—holding each other in community.



No community really exists if it's not structured, if it doesn't meet regularly, at least weekly if not daily or multiple times per week. And if we're not showing up at these gatherings regularly enough to become accountable, structure is meaningless. Showing up to structure in a disciplined way, makes community real, and makes us such a part of the community's life that opportunities for service, giving back, naturally present themselves both formally and informally. Service closes the loop, brings us full circle and gives us the sense that life has the meaning and purpose that begins to show us who we really are.

The Balance

Though these five elements are pointing toward external communities, when we are balanced, we are living our lives from the outside in and the inside out at the same time and with equal intensity. Most often and especially in the first half of life, our exterior, physical lives get all or most of our attention and energy. Entering the second half of life, when we begin to turn our attention to our interior, spiritual lives, it would be equally damaging to neglect our exterior lives. Living both our exterior and interior lives, learning how they balance the experience of what is here and now with the anticipation of what is to come, the now and not yet, is the secret of a fulfilled life.

Creating this balance begins with realizing that just as connection, structure, and discipline are critical to our exterior lives, they are just as critical to our interior lives. Unless we structure the exploration of our unseen interior lives with regular, visible activities to which we are just as disciplined, it will not bring us to any deeper interior connection.

At the same time, exploring our interior lives moves in an opposite direction from our exterior lives. Our exterior lives are primarily about addition—focused on outcomes and destinations—they are about acquiring what we believe we need to survive, find security and happiness. Physical lives are like that out of necessity, but the layers of all that addition—both conscious and subconscious, physical and emotional—create illusions that only appear to be our real identity, meaning, and purpose, keeping us in a never-ending drive to acquire more out there somewhere that will fulfill us.

The interior journey is about undoing all that, about subtraction, not addition—the process of removing layer after layer of illusion until we can see what is real. A cup must be empty before it can be filled, so this journey is a letting go and stripping away, a descent before the ascent that feels like loss and disorientation before it

it begins to feel like something approaching clarity. And clarity, in spiritual terms, is never a sense of certainty, but more a deep sense of okay-ness, that everything is going to be alright, while at the same time embracing the unknown, the mystery and paradox that makes life exciting and worth living. It's liberation from the fear-based striving of the physical journey that takes the obsessive pressure off, even as we continue to live and plan and work.

The Tools

The tools for this interior journey are all geared toward self-awareness and personal development, but not in the way we normally think of those terms. Again it's not a building up, but a stripping down that develops our awareness of the basic reality of each moment, our connection. Contemplative activities that include meditation and mindfulness, those from religious traditions—centering prayer, worship rituals, devotional reading—all work this way. But other activities such as music, dance, art, silence and solitude in nature and exercise can develop awareness as well. Whether religious or secular, when these tools are used contemplatively, they are focused on a stepping away from the activity in our conscious minds—letting go of all we think we know and have acquired in favor of what is right in front of us in this moment.

The rest of this ebook details some specific practices and techniques for both "offline" and "online" techniques. Once again, offline refers to practices for which we set aside dedicated time that will allow us to practice the interior skill of stepping away from the thoughts, emotions, and sensory input that distracts and keeps us from being present to the moment. Online is the practice of using those same techniques during each day to stay mindfully and visibly present to everyone and everything that is in our moment with us--the task at hand, the conversation we're having.



The techniques here are only a sample of some very accessible techniques for getting started in contemplative practice. We will look at a Buddhist meditation technique of following the breath as well as Centering Prayer, from Christian tradition, that uses a "sacred word" instead of breath to bring us back from a wandering mind. Whether you are approaching this practice from a secular or religious background, remember that these are physical techniques that will reflect whatever mindset or tradition you bring to them—they don't require or impose any particular belief. The goal, whether approached secularly, spiritually, or religiously, is to quiet our minds and find real presence, then practice that presence throughout each day so we can better regulate emotions, stress, anxiety, and make decisions that strengthen all our relationships. In other words, a solid foundation for any belief or tradition you bring or care to build.



Offline Practice

Offline practice is what we do in set aside time that is “offline” from the regular experience and activities of our waking days. If you can dedicate just twenty to thirty minutes in the morning or some other set time for silence and stillness either practicing one of the meditative or centering prayer techniques or just being still and coming back to stillness every time you realize your mind is wandering, you can get started and see how it begins affecting you. If you can do this twice or three times a day, all the better: once as morning routine, once as nighttime cool down before bed, and maybe once in the middle of the day or late afternoon.

You can keep it very simple at first: just sit when the house is quiet with a cup of coffee and be aware of every sensation. Consciously relax every part of your body, starting with the soles of your feet, and moving slowly up to the crown of your head. You may choose to read something like poetry or a devotional passage for a few minutes, then think about what you read, then let go of your thoughts again. If early in the morning, watch the shadow and light move across the floor. Hear the birds, smell the coffee. And when you realize your thoughts have taken over again, come back to the light and the coffee or breath or sacred word. Whatever works to get you into “choiceless awareness” aware of, but not choosing to focus on any internal thought or emotion or external sensory input. If we just show up to practice internal silence and stillness, things start happening.

Experiment with various techniques and see which ones suit you best. If you have trouble sitting still for twenty or thirty minutes, there is also walking meditation—applying the same meditative or centering techniques while walking slowly around the perimeter of a room or back yard or walking around the block when quiet and without too many distractions. You can get on a stationary bike or treadmill and once your body is in auto-rhythm, go into meditation or centering prayer. You may want to add headphones with environmental sounds, static music, or even guided imagery to help keep you focused at first, but again, treat these as training wheels that will be removed as soon as possible in favor of simple silence.



Meditation and Centering Prayer

The goal of meditation and centering prayer from a contemplative stance is to step away from the constant flow of thoughts in our minds. Our thoughts, as expressions of egoic mind and calculating consciousness separate us from the moment by objectifying, judging, comparing to other moments past or future, or engaging in abstract thought that removes us from the present. These meditational techniques allow us not to completely silence our thoughts but to allow them to flow past without choosing to focus attention on them. To be aware of thoughts and external sounds and sensations but focusing on none of them, remaining relaxed but alert is the goal using breath or sacred word to help us return to interior silence. Experiment with both to see which is best for you.

The end of the prayer period should be indicated by a timer that does not have an audible ticking or loud sound when it goes off. The timer is essential. How can we let go of thinking about our thoughts if we're wondering when time is up? A smart phone or digital timer that counts down from a set time and emits a soft tone, sets us free from thinking about time when the goal is not to think at all. If you're just starting out, set a short time to begin, say five to ten minutes and work up to the ideal time of twenty to thirty minutes.

Mindful Breath Meditation Basics

This Buddhist technique has been used for millennia and is very simple. Breath is so important that it is automatic. None of us has to remember to breathe; it happens on its own. From the moment of birth to the moment of death, we continue to take breath, making it a link between body and spirit and a metaphor for spirit in many cultures.

What we do automatically, we want to bring to awareness in meditation. Without actually thinking about it, we become aware of breath. Once aware, we let it flow without trying to control it. Whether it's fast and shallow or slow and deep, we watch it, and let it flow. As if sitting on the bank of a river, we watch the flow without creating any ripples or affecting the flow. As a mere watcher of the flow of breath, the mind begins calming and thoughts move to background noise. With practice, time can seem to come to a standstill in silence, thinking about nothing yet fully aware: the state of choiceless awareness.

- Sit comfortably in a chair with a backrest with feet flat on floor or cross-legged if comfortable. Don't cross your legs or assume any pose that would cut off circulation or distract with pain. Keep back straight against backrest and head erect and balanced—don't lean your head against wall or headrest to avoid falling asleep. Let hands rest comfortably in lap or on armrests.
- If you like, you can do a couple of deep cleansing breaths (breathe in slowly to count of three, hold for count of three exhale to count of three) and/or do a slow body scan from top of head to soles of feet, relaxing each part of your body as you go. When relaxed, move to step three.
- Focus your attention on cool air entering your nostrils as you inhale. Then focus on the warm air leaving your nostrils as you exhale. Allow yourself to become absorbed in the sensations. Cool, warm, cool, warm.
- When your mind wanders off into thoughts, images, or you have other body sensations, simply notice them and use them as a reminder to go back to the breath awareness.
- As you exhale. Let your body relax and soften into the exhale.
- Focus continually on the breath. Don't try to control your breath, let it be what it is.
- As additional thoughts, images, and feelings arise, simply return again and again to the breath.
- It does not matter how many times you have to repeat returning to breath. Don't become frustrated; welcome it as another opportunity to practice recovery from mind wandering, to gradually make full presence your new normal.



Centering Prayer Basics

We usually think of prayer as the ritualized expression of a specific faith tradition, or at least thoughts, feelings, and needs expressed in words. But in many traditions, prayer is considered a pure state of connection, spirit to spirit, an opening of mind and heart to presence beyond thoughts, words, and emotions. A connection closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than choosing—closer than consciousness itself.

Centering Prayer is an updated version of the ancient Christian practice of contemplative prayer, resting in the presence of God's spirit. We as Western people have become so focused on rational thought over the last few centuries that our prayer forms have become more rational as well--grounding our prayer in words and mental images. These words and thoughts form the walls of our ego, a perceived self that keeps us feeling separated from each other and from God. To rest in the stillness and silence of God's presence during our prayer time, we will have learned the skills we need bring that silence into each moment of our daily lives. Prayer time as a training ground to bring God's presence and oneness into each moment--practicing the presence of God--is what praying without ceasing really means.



- Posture/relaxation as step 1 and 2 above.
- Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within. The sacred word is sacred not because of its inherent meaning but because of the meaning we give it as the expression of our intention to be fully present. It can be anything suitable, but not emotionally loaded: Love, Peace, Mercy, Listen, Let Go, Silence, Stillness, Faith, Trust, Yes.
- Having chosen a sacred word, we do not change it during the prayer period because that would be to start thinking again. Of course, different sacred words can be used for different prayer sessions.
- Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the intention to let go of thought and consent to God's presence and action within. Introduce the sacred word inwardly as gently as laying a feather on a piece of absorbent cotton.
- Don't try to push your thoughts away with the sacred word giving them more energy, just place the sacred word in your mind and let it seem to expand like ripples in a pond and displace the thoughts that are distracting. Over time you will notice that you will use the sacred word less and less as the periods of silence and stillness lengthen.
- When your timer indicates the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes to come back to "periscope depth," full consciousness. As additional thoughts, images, and feelings arise, simply return again and again to the breath.

Some Practical Points

You may notice physical symptoms during meditation or centering prayer: slight pains, itches, or twitches in various parts of the body or a generalized sense of restlessness. These are usually due to the untying of emotional knots in the body, like an emotional detoxing. You may notice heaviness or lightness in your extremities. This is usually due to a deep level of spiritual attentiveness. In all cases, realize it's perfectly normal, pay no attention, and ever so gently return to the sacred word.

During your sessions, various kinds of thoughts may arise: ordinary wanderings of imagination or memory; thoughts and feelings that give rise to attractions or aversions; insights and psychological breakthroughs; self-reflections such as "How am I doing?" or "This peace is just great!"; thoughts and feelings that arise from the unloading of the unconscious. When engaged with any of these thoughts return ever-so-gently to your sacred word.



During your sessions, avoid analyzing your experience, harboring expectations, or aiming at some specific goal such as: repeating the sacred word continuously, having no thoughts, making the mind a blank, feeling peaceful or consoled, achieving a spiritual experience. All these are merely distractions during your session. The effects of mediation and centering prayer are not experienced during the session itself but later in daily life. Bring no agenda, something you need or want to achieve, to your sessions or you are defeated before you begin. Any insights or revelatory thoughts will come during the rest of your day as you grow in awareness over time.



Contemplative Journaling

Contemplative journaling can be a powerful tool for both getting our active minds out of the way and to begin to uncover subconscious fears and obsessive/destructive behavior patterns. There are many reasons for and types of journaling: journaling as a diary or record of daily events or repository for ideas and plans, a running commentary on daily life and issues faced. Some people keep prayer journals, but if those journals are understood as a record of petitionary prayer—asking God for certain outcomes—and a record of those outcomes, that is also not the type of journaling that would help us along this journey of letting go of such focus on future outcomes and abstract desires.

This type of spiritual journaling is not about time management or maximizing your effectiveness or helping acquire whatever it is you feel you need for life to be complete or more fulfilling. This journaling is for uncovering, revealing what is already within, both the positive and negative, a more tangible extension of the silence and solitude that is always a part of an authentic spiritual journey. Journaling using the five-part formula below can help us gain valuable insight on what really is driving our choices and attitudes as we drill down through the illusions we've built in our lives.

- **Out of Silence**

Just as a word has blank space before and after to define it, and a musical note needs silence before and after for us to hear it as itself, anything we speak or write must come out of a space, a silence, if it's to have any real meaning and relevance. The best contemplative journaling will come out of a period of silence. Set aside some time, usually first thing in the morning, for silence, devotional reading, centering prayer, meditation and then move from those activities seamlessly into some time for writing. The silent time tends to thin out the barrier between the conscious and subconscious, making it permeable so that journaling, if done as an extension of the silence, can reflect that deeper content.

- **Without Thinking**

This type of journaling is not meant to be read by others or communicate fully developed thoughts, though it may. It's most important not to be thinking about the writing as you write, about how people would react or what it says about you as a person. Just put the pen on the paper and put one word down after another, whatever freely comes to mind. Don't worry about syntax or grammar; don't even strive to write in full sentences; put down thoughts, phrases, single words, even draw pictures if they come to mind. Let whatever has unknowingly bubbled up in the silence of your quiet time flow onto the page in whatever form it happens to take. There is no editing here, just flow.

- **Medium as Message**

There is the question of what medium you use to write, and the temptation will be to use your computer or other digital device. While there's no one way to do this, consider going old school and using paper and pen. With digital devices such a part of our daily life, it's too easy to move mentally back into work mode as you try to flow from silence to keyboard. Moving to pen and paper instead takes you out of work mode, connects you intimately to the texture of the page, slows you down, makes it impossible to delete words, harder to go back and edit or think critically about your writing. The medium we choose should match the message we're sending; it's like the intimacy of a hand written letter as opposed to an email—holding the same paper in your hands that the letter writer held in theirs...connects you in a way digital can never do. You don't need a fancy journal, just any bound book of paper, though an actual journal may be fun.

- **Going Mobile**

Beyond early morning or evening sessions, it can be good to keep your journal with you during the day and take it on trips—something about physical movement on planes, trains, and automobiles seems to help thoughts move onto paper as well. You will find that connections and insights tend not to come during set quiet time sessions, but afterward and randomly during the day and especially on trips when normal routines are disrupted and different perspectives presented. You may find that some of your most insightful entries are written alternately looking out airplane windows or waiting in airport or train terminals. To be able to shift from normal consciousness to deeply present, journal consciousness in the midst of crowded, noisy life is the ultimate gift of the spiritual journey.

- **Letting it Rest**

As you finish an entry, avoid the temptation to reread what you've just written. Just close the book and flow into the next part of your day. This goes to the purpose of a journal like this. If you've date and time stamped the entry—a good idea—you can go back later and read entries over time to get a sense of the flow and development of your thoughts and progression along the Way. But the purpose is not to over-intellectualize your thoughts, but to uncover them, experience them, perhaps be surprised by them, connect the dots between them and your behavior patterns and choices. Letting the entries rest for a bit, moving through more moments and choices and more journaling, helps create enough distance from the words that when you do go back and read, it's almost as if someone else wrote them, that you're peering into someone else's intimate space with the objectivity to peel off another layer of illusion standing between you and the truth your seeking.



All this said, the best journaling is the journaling you actually will do, little by little and day after day, showing up to silence and writing over extended periods of time. To let go of outcome and expectation and just continue to show up, dedicated to the process...to begin to fall in love with the process, look forward to it, is infinitely more important than words or methods themselves. This is the spiritual journey: to dedicate to a process, a path, using tools that have no value in themselves, but point and motivate and move us along to see more and more clearly what is true and what is illusion.

Online Practice

Online practice is what we do in the midst of the stream of our waking days, not set apart, but along with the flow of activities and exterior noise. What we do offline in meditative practice, though it has positive effects of its own, is not an end in itself as much as it prepares us to experience our waking days with mindful presence, to engage our communities with the presence needed for accountability, discipline, and service. Over time, our offline and online practices merge into a seamless practice of presence that infuses our lives with meaning.

Mindful Presence

Mindfulness has achieved the status of meme in our culture. It is used so much, it has begun to mean nothing, so we need to reground it in contemplative meaning to make it useful again. Being contemplatively mindful means that the only thought in our heads is what we are doing at the moment: the task we are performing, the face we are speaking with. We will never feel better, more fulfilled or meaningful, or be more efficient, productive, energetic, as when we are completely present to the moment. When we allow a moment to be just what it is, not imagine it better with any addition or subtraction, it becomes just enough for us, which is as good as it gets.

Mindfulness is the practice of bringing ourselves back to the present by focusing on just what we are doing and letting that immersion displace all other thoughts. Creating a seamless life of presence as our baseline, interspersed with time for abstract thought, reflection, and planning for the future creates the balance for a life of meaning and purpose. It's at this point that we balance doing and being, the now and the not yet. We can be fully involved in our daily tasks, but with an interior awareness of the deeper task within the task that connects us all and fulfills us in meaning that makes exterior circumstances more and more irrelevant to our sense of contentment. We can work hard for future outcomes and changes in circumstances without feeling any lack at the moment in circumstances as they are.

Mindful presence flows out of offline meditative practice most fully, but we don't have to wait for our meditative technique to take hold before we simply practice presence. Becoming sensitized to the state our thought processes, aware when we have mentally wandered away from the moment, we can choose to come back to the moment and immerse there. Return to the only moment that really exists and let it be enough for us. Mindful presence can often seem too simple, too insignificant to help move the mountain of our anxiety and overwhelming emotion, but each choice to come back to presence is another pearl on the string that will eventually create the necklace of changed character.

The following exercises and practices can help us to cultivate the ability to be present, connected, and connectible.



Mindfulness Exercises

Some exercises that may help develop skill in becoming more mindful during your waking day.

- **Mindful Breathing**

This exercise can be done standing up or sitting down and mostly anywhere at any time. All you have to do is be still and focus on your breath for just one minute. Start by breathing in and out slowly. One cycle should last for approximately 6 seconds. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, letting your breath flow effortlessly in and out of your body. Let go of your thoughts for a minute. Let go of things you have to do later today or pending projects that need your attention. Simply let yourself be still for one minute. As you purposefully watch your breath, focus your senses on its pathway as it enters your body, and then watch it work its way up and out of your mouth as its energy dissipates into the world. If you enjoyed one minute of this mind-calming exercise, why not try two or three?

- **Mindful Observation**

This exercise is simple but incredibly powerful. It can connect us with the beauty of the natural environment, so often missed when we are rushing around in the car or hopping on and off trains

on the way to work. Choose a natural object from within your immediate environment and focus on watching it for a minute or two. This could be a flower or an insect, or even the clouds or the moon. Don't do anything except notice the thing you are looking at. Simply relax into a harmony for as long as your concentration allows. Look at it as if you are seeing it for the first time. Visually explore every aspect of its formation. Allow yourself to be consumed by its presence. Allow yourself to connect with its energy and its role and purpose in the natural world.

- **Mindful Awareness**

Think of something that happens every day more than once; something you take for granted, like opening a door. At the very moment you touch the doorknob, stop for a moment and be mindful of where you are, how you feel in that moment, and where the door will lead you. Similarly, the moment you open your computer to start work, take a moment to appreciate the hands that enable the process and the brain that makes your work possible. These touch-point cues don't have to be physical ones: each time you become aware of a negative thought, you can choose to stop, label the thought as unhelpful, and release the negativity. Or each time you smell food, take a moment to stop and appreciate how lucky you are to have good food to eat and share with family and friends. Choose a touch point that resonates with you today. Instead of sleepwalking through your daily motions, take occasional moments to stop and cultivate purposeful awareness of what you are doing and the blessings it brings your life.

- **Mindful Listening**

Beyond early morning or evening sessions, it can be good to keep your journal with you during the day. So much of what we see and hear on a daily basis is influenced by our past experience, but when we listen mindfully, we achieve a neutral, present awareness that lets us hear without preconception. Select a piece of music you have never heard before. You may have something in your own collection that you have never listened to, or you might choose to turn the radio dial until something catches your ear. If you can, close your eyes and put on earbuds or headphones. Try not to get drawn into judging the music by its genre, title, or artist name before it has begun playing. Instead, ignore any labels and neutrally allow yourself to get lost in the journey of sound for the duration of the song. Allow yourself to explore every aspect of the track. Even if the music isn't to your liking at first, let go of your dislike and give your awareness full permission to climb inside the track and dance among the sound waves. The idea is to just listen, to become fully entwined with the composition without preconception or judgment of the genre, artist, lyrics or instrumentation.

- **Mindful Immersion**

Beyond early morning or evening sessions, it can be good to keep your journal with you during the day. Rather than anxiously wanting to finish an everyday routine task in order to get on with doing something else, take that regular routine and fully experience it like never before. If you are cleaning your house, pay attention to every detail of the activity. Rather than treat this as a regular chore, create an entirely new experience by noticing every aspect of your actions: feel and become the motion when sweeping the floor, sense the muscles you use when scrubbing the dishes, develop a more efficient way of wiping the windows clean. The idea is to get creative and discover new experiences within a familiar routine task. Instead of laboring through and constantly thinking about

finishing the task, become aware of every step and fully immerse yourself in the progress. Take the activity beyond a routine by aligning yourself with it physically, mentally and spiritually. Who knows, you might even enjoy the cleaning for once!

- **Mindful Appreciation**

Notice five things in your day that usually go unappreciated. Whether objects or people, use a notepad to check off five by the end of the day. Simply give thanks and appreciate the seemingly insignificant things in life that support our existence but rarely get a second thought. Electricity powers your kettle, the mail carrier delivers your mail, your clothes provide warmth, your nose lets you smell the flowers in the park, your ears let you hear the birds in the tree by the bus stop, but... Do you know how these things/processes came to exist, or how they really work? Have you ever properly acknowledged how these things benefit your life and the lives of others? Have you ever thought about what life might be like without these things? Have you ever stopped to notice their finer, more intricate details? Have you ever sat down and thought about the relationships between these things and how together they play an interconnected role in the functioning of the earth? Once you have identified your five things, research them to learn everything you can about their creation and purpose to truly appreciate the way in which they support your life.

Source: <http://www.pocketmindfulness.com/>

The Welcoming Practice

Mindfulness, our sense of being present during our waking day can be shattered when powerful emotions suddenly engulf us. We have no control over our emotions; they come and go of their own accord and are especially disruptive when something in the moment triggers unconscious, painful memories that haven't been fully processed. Even if we're not consciously aware of the memories being triggered, we still feel them as emotions that can sometimes be nearly as powerful as they were at the initial event.

Recovering from these triggered emotions requires awareness, and the Welcoming Practice or prayer is a technique, a three-step shorthand way of coming back to center and presence when an emotional





trigger has pulled us out. A detailed look at the Welcoming Practice can be found at these two links. The first is a quick overview of what the technique is and how it works, and the second includes a video and printed information that goes into much more detail, which may be more than you need right now, so use as needed.

What Works: The Welcoming Prayer

The Welcoming Practice

The idea is not to run from or suppress the emotions, anxiety, or whatever has been triggered in you, but at the moment, very quickly acknowledge and lean into them, welcome them, accepting them as part of yourself but not the whole of yourself, and then let them go by moving back into the moment, back into presence.

There are little affirmations in the third part of the practice that could help you lock back into mindfulness. The original formulation of this third part is:

“
I let go of my desire for security and survival.
I let go of my desire for esteem and affection.
I let go of my desire for power and control.
I let go of my desire to change the situation.”

These would be a good affirmations or prayers to say often throughout the day. They speak to core beliefs that are all centered around our basic human need for security and survival, esteem and affection, and power and control. Our ability or inability to meet these needs/desires is the experience that became core beliefs—our most basic assumptions about life, relationships, ourselves. When we let go of trying to control, we can come back to the real/only moment and just be present.

This doesn't mean we don't work hard for the things we want and need, but we realize that we can only control processes, not outcomes. Letting go of trying to control outcomes, which is the source of stress and anxiety, by focusing on working the process to get there, both focuses us on the present moment, the only moment that exists, and is also our best chance of getting to the outcome we desire. Without the sense of stress.



Contemplative Walks

As in the mindfulness exercises above, here are ways to take a walk that transforms the purpose of walking—from moving from one location to another or getting exercise for a future weight or fitness goal, to an experience for its own sake. When we walk contemplatively, we are bringing our no-agenda, mindful attitude to every step. We can experience each thing we encounter more completely when we don't name it in our minds. That's not a tree we're seeing, maybe a sycamore or eucalyptus, but a green shape against a blue background that moves and reflects light and creates a sensation, a feeling. By not naming things, we don't think about them or try to control them in any way. A contemplative walk has no agenda or purpose beyond the not-naming experience of each step.

- **Breathing Walk**

Begin by allowing your mind to focus on your breathing as you walk. Simply notice your breath. Don't try to do anything with it. Just notice. Where in your body do you feel your breath? Your abdomen, chest, back, or even high in your collarbone? What do you notice? Is your breath smooth, rhythmic, and easy? Is it hesitant, sporadic, or labored? What else do you notice that perhaps you haven't noticed before? As you focus on your breathing, does anything change without you having to purposely try to change it?

- **Seeing Walk**

Shift your focus to what you see. What are the shapes, textures, movement, and colors that you notice? Can you look without naming the objects you see, even for a few seconds, but just see them as shapes, textures, movement, and colors? If you are in familiar territory, are there things you notice that you've never seen before?

- **Hearing Walk**

Shift your focus to what you hear. What sounds do you hear? Listen more and more deeply; what are the sounds underneath the sounds you normally hear? Even for a few seconds, can you hear what you hear without naming the sound? What are the nuances of the sounds? Are there aspects to the sounds that you never noticed before?

- **Sensing Walk**

Now shift your focus to what you sense in your body. As your body moves, what do you notice? Gently scan your body as you are moving, starting with your feet and ending at your head. Can you feel your muscles as they move? Can you feel the touch of your clothing, air, or sun on your skin? What can you notice that you've never noticed before?

- **Bringing Them All Together**

Now see if you can bring breathing, seeing, hearing, and sensing all together as you mindfully enjoy your walk. Don't worry if you find yourself quickly shifting between these channels of awareness. Just keep practicing and see if you can, even for a few seconds, be aware of them all at the same time. What do you notice that you haven't noticed before?

Source: <https://sarah-sherwood.com>



Enjoying the Ride

Why take the time and spend the energy to build your own contemplative program, one to which you are actually disciplined on a daily basis? There has to be a clear benefit, an answer to your felt need for missing parts of your life, and an antidote for the symptoms you feel, whether stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness. There is no switch to flip or



pill to take that will give us what we long for most as humans, but contemplative practice will take us there at a speed determined by the intensity of our programs and our ability to make friends with the paradox of the letting go, stripping away process.

When it comes to the interior journey that contemplative practice engages, there is nothing outside of ourselves to acquire that will make us whole. The whole person we seek is already standing within us as if frozen in a block of ice. The ice represents all the of the core beliefs, illusions, and attitudes we've adopted, both consciously and unconsciously, to survive and try to thrive as life and others have hurt and traumatized us. The contemplative process is about chipping away all that ice, everything that is not who we really are—not about acquiring something we don't already possess. The greatest stories our poets and writers have produced from Odysseus to King Arthur to Dorothy and Wizard of Oz show us this same shape of the journey.

The Right Path

How do we know we're on the right path? We've been trained to judge rightness against preset moral, ethical, or theological standards. But here, rightness can only be experienced moment by moment as we travel the path we've chosen.

Whatever you come to believe or have faith in—whatever becomes your personal philosophy or theology, your mindset and worldview, if it does two things for you, then it's "right." If it allows you to accept life on life's terms, make friends with life as it presents in any given moment, the good, bad, ugly, beautiful without any need to medicate...and if at the same time it allows you to live with a sense of hope and gratitude, there's nothing broke. Don't fix it.

What you believe is "right" when it allows you become and remain vulnerable enough to really connect with everyone and everything around you, including unseen spirit. In the moment you feel grateful, realize that life is a gift you could never have given yourself, your symptoms vanish. It is impossible to be grateful and unhappy at the same time. String enough of those moments together, and your life is changed.

Of course even when you feel that you can finally enjoy the ride of your life, you're only one trauma or loss away from needing to revisit all you have come to believe. Life is an endless cycle of journeys, setting out from the latest of life's losses and coming full circle back to center. Learning to love the circles is what we do in contemplative practice. Let your gratitude be your compass, and let your ability to enjoy the ride, even when the ride is not what you would have chosen, be the signpost of a right path.