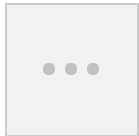


Meditation and the Practice of Virtue- Posted July 13, 2009 on "The Meditative Life," a blog for *Psychology Today*.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-meditative-life/200907/meditation-and-the-practice-virtue>

Establishing a meditative life can lead to a more settled and attentive mind, but to what end will you direct these capacities? If you are more attentive, to what will you direct your attention? If more settled, on what will you rest your mind?

The legendary Tibetan sage Milarepa (c. 1052-1135) is said to have used his miraculously *siddhis* or "psychic powers" to bring devastation to an avaricious landlord who treated his parents poorly. When meditation made its way to the West in the sixties, some of those most interested in its offerings were the special forces of the world's military. Their uses of attention would be lethal. I raise this issue because in their descriptions of the meditative path, the contemplative traditions of all cultures emphasize the importance of virtue, and for good reason. Ethical conduct is not guaranteed by contemplative practice. Meditation can be used for selfish as well as selfless ends, to win basketball games or turn a greater profit as well as to mitigate suffering. Therefore it is important at the outset to lay the sound ethical foundations for the meditative life. If one does this adequately, then one's practice serves not only oneself, but others as well.



In the Buddhist tradition this is called *sīla* or "moral conduct," and is understood to be the foundation on which the entire meditative path is based. In the Eightfold Way, Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood define moral conduct for the Buddhist. In Christianity one speaks of faith, hope, and love, or of the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Whether the virtues be Roman, Jewish, or Hindu, every society and culture has recognized the importance of ethics for life. For these reasons I always begin my meditation sessions with a practice that directs me toward virtue and selflessness. In this I am helped by two observations.

The Portal of Humility, and the Path of Reverence

The first is a statement by the Austrian philosopher [Rudolf Steiner](#) (link is external) who wrote that humility is the portal through which the contemplative practitioner should enter into the practice of meditation. The

second is from Albert Schweitzer's journal of a boat trip along the narrow creeks of Africa. He had long been seeking a universal ground for ethics when suddenly, "Late on the third day, at the very moment when, at sunset, we were making our way through a herd of hippopotamuses, there flashed upon my mind, unforeseen and unsought, the phrase, 'Reverence for Life.' The iron door had yielded: the path in the thicket had become visible." Humility and reverence for life have become for me the portal and path into the meditative life.

I have found three types of practices particularly helpful in cultivating the moods of humility and reverence. The first is the boundless beauty and majesty of nature. When John Muir wrote *Our National Parks*, he suggested that we, "Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees." Having spent a few minutes settling the body and mind, as I described in [my previous blog entry](#), I imagine a beloved scene from nature. In my case, it is a high mountain pond in the Rockies to which my family backpacked many years ago. In my mind, I settle myself pondside on a bit of grass and picture the water's shimmering surface, the winging of a bird in the blue sky overhead, the craggy peaks set between pond and sky, a gentle breeze on my cheek... The sheer beauty and scale of the scene invokes in me the feelings of wonder and humility. Like Schweitzer, I feel a reverence for this good Earth and for life. I linger and deepen the feelings of humility and reverence as I reorient from my busy life to my life of meditation.

Prayer

The second practice is not open to everyone equally: it is prayer. For those with access to prayer, it too can be a powerful and effective entry point into meditation. It also is a way of redirecting ourselves away from the mundane to the essential dimensions of life via humility and reverence. Finally, a human being can become the door. This practice is somewhat more challenging, but we can place a mentor, a loved one, even a student or client before us in our imagination, and cultivate reverence before the mystery and preciousness of their being. Every human life is boundless, a pearl of great price. We can approach the meditative life with that perception clearly in mind. I find this last means of special value if, later in my meditation, I wish to work with a practice that is concerned with the problems of another person, but more of that later.

The way we end a practice session is as important as the way we begin. I close with dedication and gratitude. Dedication to remind me that the fruits of meditation are not primarily for me, but are intended to

be of benefit to others. Gratitude for the grace in my life, but in this moment for the time spent in the sanctuary of contemplative silence.

For those who appreciate a bit of scientific evidence that meditation can affect one's ethical life, consider the [2008 study](#)(link is external) by neuroscientists Antoine Lutz and Richard Davidson at the University of Wisconsin. They compared 16 novices with 16 expert meditators concerning compassion, and found that the "data indicate that the mental expertise to cultivate positive emotion alters the activation of circuitries previously linked to empathy." Which is a scientific way of saying that the practice of cultivating compassion makes a real difference in the depth of our empathetic connection to others.

I conclude with a few lines from St. Francis and from the 8th century Buddhist Shantideva who, although separated by continents and centuries, voiced the same moral sentiments, which can be ours as well. First, St. Francis:

[Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace](#)(link is external);

where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon...

Then, Shantideva:

[May I be a protector](#)(link is external) to those without protection,

A guide for those who journey,

And a boat, a bridge, a passage

For those desiring the further shore...