

Making the Most of your Holiday Stress

November 30, 2017

If you've ever been on a meditation retreat, especially a silent, multi-day retreat, you'll know what I mean by *suspicious excitement*. Despite your past experience, you can't help but look forward with eager anticipation to the extended periods of intense practice, the opportunity to work deeply within yourself, the possibility of insights and breakthroughs. You know it's one of the most effective ways to boost your practice, short of taking robes and ordaining at a monastery.

But you are also a little wary. This sort of meditation is physically demanding, and can be emotionally challenging. Deep rooted issues can arise and must be addressed with vulnerable attention. Your days might be filled not with insight, but with frustration, disappointment, or sorrow. You may be put through an emotional wringer, but by the end of the retreat, you can feel the purification resulting from the hard work. And you can see the effects long after you have returned home. You know the next retreat might again be unpleasant, but you know that it will be worth every minute. (For those of you who have not been on residential retreats like this, don't worry – the experience is just as likely to be blissful and joyous. But somewhere down the line, the muck in your psyche will need to be cleaned out).

Deep growth can come from working with hard physical and emotional challenges. A multi-day residential retreat is a way of intentionally creating a situation in which such challenges are likely to occur. At a retreat, you voluntarily put yourself into a potentially unpleasant situation in order to stimulate growth. Though potentially unpleasant, it is a safe place, because it is a controlled environment. You know what you're getting into, and you know what to do or who to speak to if it gets too difficult to manage. It's all planned out in advance.

Sometimes we don't have the choice about whether to participate in challenging situations. The Christmas season has just begun, and whether or not you celebrate the holiday, you won't be able to avoid the sometimes-unpleasant aspects: decorations and carols and in-your-face consumerism is already here. The expectations of family or coworkers, or the sad memory of past holidays, or myriad other associations can create an emotional environment that is highly charged and stressful. Just thinking about it can cause some people anxiety.

But the fact that you have no choice about participating in this unpleasant environment doesn't make it any less effective as a means to deepen your practice. Heck, you *paid* to enter the challenging environment of a retreat. And here you are, being offered another wonderful opportunity to grow, for free! The stresses and challenges of the coming days won't be so overwhelming if you can make them into a spontaneous retreat for intentional practice and deep exploration. Now if you don't happen to be a meditator, or have some other tools for intentionally dealing with challenges like this, it's hit or miss whether the experience will result in growth or in crushing your spirit. But the fact that you are here tonight means that you do have at least a desire to develop some meditational skills.

Let's look for a moment at what comprises a healthy meditation practice. Most people know about the formal periods of sitting on a cushion on the floor or in a chair, typically with eyes closed, and in silence and stillness. This is the foundational activity, in which you learn and deepen your meditation skills, and can explore insights without distraction.

In the end, you want to be able to do this same kind of deep meditation at any time, in any life situation. That's why I also encourage you to do meditation in motion: walking meditation, yoga, dishwashing meditation, and so on. These types of things help to bring your formal practice into your every day life.

In addition to such formal practice in stillness and in motion, it's good to also make a habit of doing *informal* meditation throughout the day. This could include *background* meditation, when you are mostly concentrating on your day-to-day activities, but you keep a little attention going in the background at the same time. For example, you could be doing background loving kindness meditation while you are in a meeting at work. You are attending to the meeting, but there's a little awareness in the back of your mind that you are sending love and well wishes to those in the room. Or you might be watching your emotional responses as a background meditation while you have a conversation. Just a little bit of attention on your internal reactions can help moderate the words that come out of your mouth.

Another informal practice is what I call *micro-hits*. This is when you use short periods of unclaimed time during the day to do a burst of full-attention technique. Say you are waiting in line to order your lunch. You've got a few minutes while the people ahead of you are served. Use this time to follow your breath with full attention, or meditate on the sounds around you, or on the sensation of hunger. It may just be three minutes, or even 30 seconds, but it is intentional, focussed meditation, and it will have lasting benefits in the long term, and quite likely immediate effects when it's your turn to order. (Maybe you'll feel less irritated or more sociable).

These types of activities will help you approach daily life with the same equanimity and compassion that you find when you are sitting on your cushion at home.

The coming chaos of the lead-up to Christmas is exactly the kind of daily life situation we would like to be able to attend to with mindfulness and calm. So guess what! the cosmos is giving you a beautifully arranged retreat environment. You know it might be unpleasant, but you also know that deep growth can come from unpleasant situations, *if* you intentionally and rigorously apply your meditation techniques during the experience. And while you won't be able to shut your eyes and pay full attention to your emotional responses during a shopping trip at a noisy mall, you *can* apply a background practice (such as loving kindness), and you *can* do micro-hits throughout the day: while you're waiting in line to pay, while you're walking from the parking lot to the store, while you're using the rest room.

The key to making stress a tool for growth is *planning*. At a retreat, the sitting schedule is planned ahead for you, and maybe you are instructed on a specific technique, and so on. In a real-life situation, you need to make your own plans. Spend a couple minutes in the morning looking at the day ahead, and identify situations during which you could do background practice or micro-hits. Analyze each situation to determine what kind of technique to use. Then write it down or put reminders on your phone, or do whatever it takes to remember your plan. And be sure to try for 10 or 20 minutes of formal practice sometime during the day also.

Let's use the situation of shopping in a mall as an example of how you'd plan a real-life retreat day. You might start with a five minute micro-hit in your car once you have parked at the mall, doing breath meditation to ground yourself and establish some calm. As you walk from your car to the mall, you could plan on a micro-hit of noting your emotional sensations. Perhaps as you approach the mall, you feel a growing anxiety in your chest, but because you are doing an intentional meditation as you walk, you are able to observe the anxiety with detachment and have equanimity with it. Next,

your plan could include doing a micro-hit relaxation exercise every time you have to stand in line. And walking from store to store, you will intentionally send loving kindness to each person you pass, and will maintain loving kindness as a background practice as you shop.

By the time you get home, you will have meditated for a good chunk of time (all combined), you will have observed how you reacted to various stressful events and cultivated equanimity for those reactions, you will have blessed the lives of everyone you've passed, and I'd put money on this: that you will feel calm and relaxed at the end of the day, maybe even happy!

Holiday stress is not something you have to simply survive. It's a free, built-in-to-life retreat that you can use to accelerate your spiritual growth and deepen your spiritual life.

To help you get organized, I've made up a strategy worksheet that you can use to plan each day. Carry it with you to remind you of your strategy. And at the end of the day, make a note of what worked, what didn't, what you learned, and how grateful you are for the cultural challenges that speed you on your way toward freedom.

Challenging-situation meditation strategy worksheet

Today's date:

Formal Practice.

I will try to meditate for _____ minutes at _____ (time/location)

Situational analysis:

List today's specific challenges in chronological order. Include relevant environmental elements (location, who is present, etc), as well as the area of anticipated personal challenge (frustration, impatience, fear of pain, etc).

Situational Strategy

Consider each challenge above and identify specific techniques you want to address them with. Be as specific as possible. Include times of day or specific triggers ("waiting in line"). Define your strategy for each situation. (Loving kindness, watching thoughts, grounding with breath, etc).

Micro-hits (short duration of full-concentration): I will do these Micro-hits at these times or situations:

Background Practice (ongoing duration of minimal concentration): I will try to do this technique in the background at these times or situations:

Review and Assessment

Review and assess these strategies at the end of the day to inform your strategy tomorrow. Make notes here.