

The Consciousness Explorers Club's

Meditate, Celebrate, Activate Retreat/Advance Manual

“Hard times require furious dancing.” - Alice Walker

This guide contains practical information about meditation practice in general, as well as how (and why) we do things on CEC retreats in particular.

The CEC retreat, like our sits and our interactive practices, is an exploration. It's an exploration of different states of mind, which means it's also an exploration of different states of being and doing: sitting, walking, eating, moving, acting, dreaming, loving and relating.

It is a place where, ideally, you can be free. Free to be who you are, from your most generous depths. Traditional Buddhism has ethical principles – called “precepts” – to help with this. They aren't random top-down injections; rather, they're insights into what it means to act from a genuinely free place. ‘Not stealing’ is about not grabbing what isn't offered – space, conversational bandwidth, more than your share of the food. ‘Not lying’ is about not distorting the truth, not exaggerating, not trying to manipulate the situation or be something you're not. ‘Not killing’ is part of a broader principle of not harming, but can also be interpreted as not pushing away – pushing away threatening views, threatening silences. Buddhists add two more: don't cause sexual harm, and don't get intoxicated. This is how we want to do things on retreat.

Each precept has its empowering counter-part: generosity, honesty, kindness, clarity and humility. Living this way, we begin to experience true autonomy, a release from anxiety even as we chart unfamiliar ground.

You've done it, explorer. All those narrow misses, all those lonely mountaintops where you summoned the courage to keep going. Time to rest, play, love.

Meditate. Celebrate. Activate.

Hierarchy of Needs (reversed)

O₂

H₂O

Food

Health

Shelter

Clothing

Sitting

Sleeping

Technology

Sex Drugs Rock and Roll

Then Comes the Self Actualization

Air There will be air. Please breathe it.

Water Drink plenty of potable water, at least a couple liters a day. This is important, because we are water, mostly. And, according to the Taoists, we're at our best when we move like it. Please bring your own refillable water bottle(s).

Food Healthy, vegetarian meals are provided, with accommodations for other specific dietary needs. We eat breakfast and lunch in silence, and break silence at dinner. Try to be aware of the sensations in your body as you anticipate, choose, and eat your food, as well as afterwards.

Health Take care of your health, and the health of others. Wash your hands thoroughly and frequently, don't cough/sneeze on each other. If you have any ongoing medical problems that need active treatment, or significant allergies, please let us know!

Shelter Everyone will be comfortably housed in wooden structures. Unless you're camping, in which case you'll be comfortably housed next to wooden structures whose washrooms and common spaces you can use.

Clothing Dress for comfortable sitting and light movement. Bring layers to shed during movement and outdoor walks, as your body heats up. Also advised: rain gear / umbrella, and fleece / sweater for the cool evenings.

Sitting We'll be sitting a lot! Finding a comfortable position for meditation practice is important. To that end, please try to bring your own sitting gear, whatever works for you, fully loaded and ready to rock. We'll also have a bunch of cushions on hand, and there will be chairs available to sit in as well. Feel free to alternate positions throughout the retreat - floor sitting, chair sitting, lying down, standing up - to maximize comfort and give your body a break.

Sleeping Sleep, nap, rest when you can! Sometimes it's hard in a new environment, especially when sharing rooms. Consider earplugs, in case you room with a snorer.

Technology It's easier to find no-self with no-cellphone. Retreats are a great opportunity to take a break from what's pulling you away from the experience of the present moment: our cell phones, telephones, emails, portable devices and laptops. Please support your practice, and everyone else's, by limiting your use to what is absolutely necessary. If you have responsibilities that demand your virtual attention we ask that you try to use technology discreetly, and away from others so it doesn't disrupt their focus.

Sex, Drugs, Rock and Roll Sorry to be a killjoy, but "no" to the first two. Mindful sex may be the best kind, but for the purposes of our retreat we're staying with the mindfulness part only, so no making-out until you get home.

Also no cigarettes in the common areas. We put this after "sex," because of Johnny Carson, who, when asked if he smoked after sex, said: "I don't know, I've never looked."

The retreat centre is a smoke-free facility. If you wish to smoke, please walk down the road past the edge of the centre property. It's also recommended that you change your clothes before sitting, as some people are sensitive to the smell. And now that we're talking about smells and burning things, please do not light candles or incense in the rooms or meditation hall without the permission of the retreat coordinator ('cause they cause fires), and also please refrain from using perfumes,

colognes, and other strongly scented toiletries. Meditation makes many people more sensitive; body chemicals that once smelled harmless now reek like dead fruiting animals.

Party prohibitions extend to weed, alcohol and other intoxicants. Except caffeine. We allow that, otherwise we'd crumble into another Dark Age, like the one they had before greater Arabia saved the civilization with the coffee house.

What about rock and roll? Yes, in the form of song, and eyes-closed secret dance-floor steps, and of course the Buddha's general rock'n'roll attitude, partying with demons in the forest and pounding green tea and so on. Please: no amplified beatbox machines. We prefer to trip off birds and the high-tinkling palette where sounds explode and disappear.

OK, onto the Self-Actualization (ie Practice Guidelines)...

MEDITATE

Meditation isn't only about self-actualization. It's more fundamental. If you look at Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, at the bottom of his pyramid, along with food, air and so on, is "homeostasis" – the critical requirement of an organism to keep itself balanced and regulated. Otherwise the system falls apart, and none of the higher needs are even possible. This, in essence, is what meditation practice is about. It's a form of regulation for mind, body, and spirit, a balance of energy and stillness, and a way to find centre independent of conditions. Meditation is unique as a human activity in that it's both at the top and bottom of Maslow's hierarchy. It points to our basest need and our highest potential.

There are many ways to go about this, and many qualities of attention that combine to make it happen. At our retreat, we emphasize four primary "factors." They're a distillation of what in Buddhism is called the "Factors of Awakening." Their deliberate cultivation can lead, over time, to an exquisitely balanced mind, one better able to respond to life's changing conditions.

The first factor gets you settled: **concentration**. Concentration is about holding the direction – of attention, of intention. The mind wanders; bring it back.

Concentration simplifies and unifies the mind. The more poised and still you are, the deeper you go. It is a kind of samurai commitment. Right at the start of each sit, you commit to what may seem, on the surface, to be utterly – sometimes narcoleptically – dull and uninspiring. The sensation of breathing, say, or the hum of the industrial-size air conditioner, or the crunch of gravel under the soles of your feet. You think: 'is it possible to go insane from boredom? Will they find me bent over my cushion, so under-stimulated that my heart just stopped?'

That's why we had you sign a waiver!

Ha – meditation joke (these have the factor of being not funny). Actually, the opposite turns out to be the rule: over time we learn that any part of our experience can become both rich and delicate, leading us into absorption and joy and a dimension of stillness that is impossible to describe until we're there, at which point there's no longer any need for descriptions. Concentration – like each of the factors – is a horizon line to aim for; we can always be more concentrated. So be

good-natured and patient as training matures and capacity builds.

The second factor gets you moving: **curiosity, or investigation**. Experience – reality - is waiting to be explored. We rarely think this way, so focused are we on the seemingly concrete details of the external world. But the shape and particulate matter of the world – to say nothing of our own insides – is also an exploration. The longer we look, the more surprising things can become. In this way, we increase our energy and our clarity. Unconscious patterns and layers emerge from the murk. And then ... beyond and through it all, curled like a question mark inside every moment ... something fundamental and fresh and strange can begin to permeate our experience. Intimations of home.

It's the third factor that really slides us into that home: **equanimity**. Equanimity is smoothness, frictionless-ness, water on the flume. It's a commitment – often quite courageous – to be radically open to exactly this experience, to not reject or grasp any part of it. In this sense, it is the ultimate homeostatic act, for it increasingly allows us to stay at a still point while the world moves through and past.

Equanimity manifests in the body as an easy-going acceptance and lightness and availability. Over time we learn that most big discoveries in practice are preceded by a moment of equanimous surrender. The more we let go and trust the process, the more life itself is free to lift us up and set us down exactly where we need to be. Concentration, curiosity, openness ... these are the homeostatic ground. They create the perfect medium through which anything can flow. So why not deliberately flow some **friendliness and joy** through that medium? This is our fourth factor, the one that makes the center such a good place to be. It's not sentimental – it is, rather, the tiniest attitude shift away from neutrality to the practice of positive regard, a practice that can be stoked anytime.

That's basically the trajectory, the essence of what the CEC is about. We don't wait for one factor to be perfect – we work on all of them together, patiently, playfully, in community.

A Continuity of Mindfulness

It took us years to learn this lesson: retreats are a rare opportunity to practice all the time. You don't need to wait for the orientation to begin. You can practice

mindfulness as soon as you turn off the car engine.

Take a breath. Note the quiet, the lull, before hidden sounds reveal themselves. The ping of the car engine, settling. Someone behind you, shuffling. Your body begins to anticipate stretching; you feel an urgency in your legs. There's a subtle lift in your chest, an excitement around what these days will mean, who you might meet. Images flit across the mind's eye, including the image of a giant lizard breathing fire, accompanied by monks chanting and the sound of police sirens. And so on. A world of experience, and you haven't even opened the door.

Throughout the retreat, the aim is to maintain a continuity of mindfulness, to continuously be aware of what is going on in our bodies, minds, and surroundings. We use that awareness to see into our mental patterns and habitual responses. Over time, this can lead to insights about the nature of sensory reality itself.

Mindfulness gets powerful and electric when practiced all day long. Doing this in the city is difficult. On retreat it's easier. It imbues moments with calm, and allows us to give more time and attention to our lives.

Silence

Our retreat has a flow. Every day we practice silence until late afternoon, and which point we transition back and forth between silence and mindful conversation. Silence allows our minds to settle and become clearer, to be in deeper contact with ourselves and, believe it or not, those around us. We support our own practice and the practice of our fellow explorers by honouring this.

During silent periods, in common areas – bedrooms, bathrooms, and so on – if we find it necessary to speak, please be discrete to help preserve the peaceful vibe. In the absence of words, we discover another kind of knowing.

We also adhere to these principles during the silent meditations. Please breathe as quietly as possible, move carefully to avoid rustling clothes. Avoid long drawn-out world-weary sighs, or breaking into song, or speaking with a fake Scottish accent, because now you're ripping off Jeff's best guided meditation shtick, and he only comes up with one funny idea a year.

Sitting Meditation

Sitting meditation is like returning home to give full attention to, and care for,

ourselves. The first thing to do is to find the dignity in the sitting posture – the sense of poise, of equanimity, of friendliness. This small attitude-shift has a huge effect on experience. If you were to do this every moment of your life you wouldn't need to meditate. Meditation is the building-up of exactly this habit.

When our posture is stable, we're able to maintain a relaxed and upright, supported position. We then bring our full attention and explorer curiosity to some aspect of our inner and outer sensory experience. Again, we try to do this with kindness and appreciation. As weird as this may sound, we do our best to cradle the object in our attention, as though it were a puppy. Long drawn-out sigh: manIlovepuppies ... snugglysquirmybellyfoldsonwarmskin.

Stop thinking about puppies.

Actually, it's perfectly normal for your mind to wander, and ponder. That's what minds are for – the brain excretes thought the way the pancreas excretes insulin. When this happens and you recognize it, you good-naturedly bring your attention back to the meditation “object.” And again. And again. Each of these moments is a victory and should be recognized as such; a deeper part of you has remembered. The point of meditation isn't to stop your thoughts; it's to stop having a problem with them. To get some space around them, to not take your own habits of mind so seriously. Meditation teaches us to take a stand in awareness itself, the part that remembers, the deep part of you that – to get mystical for a moment – seems to connect to the deep part of everyone else. At least, this is the experience many long-term meditators and teachers report.

This is one reason why sitting meditation is so healing. We discover we can sit with whatever's inside us – our pain, anger, and irritation, or our joy, our drool, our great and peaceful drool. All just sensations coming and going, expanding and contracting, vibrating away at their own frequency. No need to get so uptight. No need to react, to push, to pull, to run, to suppress. This is the warrior's path – the peaceful warrior, in a parade of puppies, carried on a royal litter.

Stop daydreaming and get back to the meditation!

Let's see, what else? If your legs or feet fall asleep and/or start to throb in pain, you have two options. Option one is move them – discretely, quietly. Option two is

try to equanimize the pain by going directly into it, samurai-style, noticing the discomfort with radical openness until it breaks up into vibrations. They call this strong determination. It's a valid strategy.

What Technique?

There are many meditation techniques out there. Each plays with a different aspect of human experience, and each creates more intimacy with the ground of human experience. Many of the practices we teach are inspired by Buddhism in general (and our teacher Shinzen Young in particular), but of course since we are also part of the predictable mainstreaming of "secular mindfulness," we can also say these skills and techniques are general enough that they can be accommodated by any belief system. Which doesn't mean there isn't lots of freaky cosmic mystery wrapped up inside them. Oh yes there is. Mindfulness is a spiritual Trojan Horse; secular pinheads, prepare for mind-meld.

Why teach several techniques and not just one? Excellent question. It is absolutely true you can spend your entire life just observing the breath and this will nourish you in all kinds of marvellous and unexpected ways. In the same spirit, you can spend your entire life in one small section of southwestern Ontario and be utterly fulfilled. But you can also travel. And travel has all kinds of enriching benefits and learning experiences.

By learning more techniques, not only do you develop a broader understanding of yourself and spiritual practices in general, you also get more flexibility in how you respond to life. Think of these techniques as your consciousness explorer's tool belt. Different occasions require different tools. What's more, not everyone is equally proficient with every tool. The idea is to help you identify practices that click for you, which you can then take to the cushion and out into the world.

Effects vs Results in Meditation and Self-Pacing

The last thing to say here about meditation is the trickiest. However predictable certain aspects of meditation may be, the process itself is always deeply mysterious and personal. Your path and growth is always unique to you. What works for you may not work for someone else, and it may not work for you at a different time.

There are almost always periods when meditation is easy, and periods when it is hard. There is no roadmap for this; as the Spanish poet Antonia Machado once wrote, “Wanderer, there is no road / The road is made by walking.”

We can't really judge the effectiveness of a practice by the experiences we have on the cushion. Think about jogging. One day we feel invigorated, the next we feel exhausted, the next we feel calm and on point. The effects of jogging change from day to day, but the results of jogging are the same over a lifetime: better cardiovascular health. The same is true of meditation. One day we feel invigorated, the next we feel exhausted, the next we feel calm and on point. But it all leads to better mental-emotional-spiritual health over a lifetime.

If we don't recognize this, then, the moment our practice gets hard – the moment, in other words, that we get to the real learning – then we bail. Try not to do this. Practice is partly about learning to tolerate uncomfortable emotions and situations. A lot of our suffering at these times comes from subtle expectations that this shouldn't be happening to us. Try to be patient. Growth happens at its own pace. We learn not to look to particular meditation experiences to determine if our meditation is “working.” Instead, we look to our lives. Are we more calm, more present, more connected? This is the true litmus test of a successful practice.

That said, sometimes we do need to change the amount and type of practice. More meditation isn't always better. That's like imagining that more muscle reps are always better. You need to pace yourself! If your meditation practice isn't helping you in your life, then seek advice in your community or with an experienced teacher. You may need to change something in your approach, or sit for longer, or sit for shorter.

For some reason this last point is rarely discussed in meditation circles. Although it seems to happen less often with beginners, meditation can cause problems. It can make us spaced-out, or indifferent. It can cause headaches and destabilizing energetic implosions in the body. It can make us irritable and fragmented, or rigid and dogmatic. This should hardly be surprising. We are training our minds, and we can train them in unhelpful ways, just like we can train our bodies in unhelpful ways. Unfortunately, there's no cosmic review board you can petition to find the exact right answer for what you should do when. Teachers and books and

community can help a lot, but ultimately you are the best authority on you. There's always trial and error in a practice. It's like life. It IS life. You don't get a road map or a manual when you're born, and you don't get one when you start to meditate, even though everyone wants one and gets outraged when their fantasy of the perfect teacher draws a blank or fucks up. We're all just doing the best we can here – pooling wisdom, comparing notes, drinking too much wine at dinner parties, etc. So pay attention. Notice how you are from day to day, both positive symptoms in mind and body and relationship, as well as possible challenging symptoms. Talk to others. Use all of this as the basis for making any necessary adjustments in your practice.



Meditate

CELEBRATE

We explore both inward and outward forms of celebration. The outward forms are evident in the many creative and embodied practices we do throughout the day. We celebrate through feeding ourselves, being in nature, moving our bodies, making art and conversation, finding rest and sleep.

Celebrate also has an inward form – a quality of gratitude and appreciation that can suffuse and shape all activities, no matter how ostensibly mundane.

You are already subtly participating in this meditation any time you see something you like: a flower, a view, a person. Each likable thing is a compact blip of care coming from the world. The only difference is now you're taking a split-second to notice your own appreciation of this dynamic happening. You can also do this when you see someone do something kind, or when you hear a bit of wisdom that resonates in your gut.

These are the three Greek “transcendentals”: beauty, goodness, and truth. They are opportunities to practice appreciation and gratitude.

If you've ever had the experience of appreciating something, then you are already practicing this meditation in a low-level way. Mindfulness teaches us that the simple recognition that you're in the middle of appreciating a thing can dramatically amplify that appreciation. It both prolongs the feeling, and makes it more likely to happen more frequently and more fulsomely. It's a practice. It's also a positive feedback loop: the more grateful and appreciative we are, the more care you have to put back into the world, which increases, in turn, the amount you have to be appreciative of, and so on. Over time, we find ourselves more good-natured towards life's many forms and experiences.

Like everything else, this practice is a horizon line to aim for, and hard to do when life is kicking you repeatedly in the lower back. Nevertheless, in this protected venue, do the experiment. Try it when you wake in the morning. When you brush your teeth. When you walk, eat, ogle, breathe. You don't have to tell anyone.

Eating

Nutrition is part of celebration, part of what helps us flourish. We've taken care at this retreat to offer food that is healthy and nourishing. We try to do the whole

sensual raisin taste-sensation thing: ‘Eat raisin slow, taste wow fruit flavour explosion, me never felt so alive, thank you Jon Kabat-Zinn etc.’.

We eat breakfast and lunch in silence, with mindfulness and explorer curiosity. There are sensations associated with eating that go beyond taste: the clutch of craving as we hold the food to our mouths, our internal images of ourselves, the tension between fullness and satiation, all kinds of complex conditioning and emotion. A big theme in this retreat is how mindfulness can bring unconscious habits and patterns into consciousness. Food can make us vibrant and alert, or it can make us sluggish and distracted. One of the consequences of practice is you become more sensitive to how different foods affect you. Sometimes we eat to escape tension or other uncomfortable sensations in our body. Eating (especially sugary foods) provides a momentary escape, but it has other consequences.

If you notice a craving for a particular food, send your attention into any feelings, thoughts and bodily sensations that may be present. Maintain this awareness for a period of time. Then, if you wish, eat. Or not. At least now it’s up to you.

Here’s a Zen grace:

Earth, water, fire, air and space combined to make this food. Numberless beings gave their lives and labours that we may eat. May we be nourished, that we may nourish life.

Walking Meditation

Some Zen Master once said that the miracle is not to walk on water, or on hot coals, but to walk on the Earth itself. That’s how boggling “normal” walking can be when we bother to pay attention. With each step, we arrive in the here and now. We incarnate. We practice our freedom.

Try it. Notice the tiny adjustments of balance and pressure, the feeling of the ground reaching up and tickling your feet, those “down-turned hands,” as our friend David Abram calls them. If you’re outside, from time to time look up and seize the size of life – the trees, the clouds, sky sky sky. Listen to the birdy-birds go chirp-chirp- chirp. Feel the breeze. Lick a random forest mushroom (no don’t do that). Life is all around and we’re aware that we’re alive, healthy and capable of walking in peace.

Yoga

The modern practice of yoga is descended from the insight that a healthy, open and well-aligned body helps create the conditions for a healthy, open and well-aligned mind. Originally, the asana or physical movements of yoga were to prepare practitioners for sitting meditation - in fact the original asanas were mostly sitting postures. Although it's fashionable to bemoan the loss of yoga's meditative roots ('it's all just industrial aerobics!'), if you're paying attention you'll know there's a renaissance happening in the world of yoga. Serious teachers are integrating meditative insights in inventive new ways.

All mindful movement, yoga included, is an opportunity to unite our minds and bodies, to seamlessly yoke (yoga means "union") our attention and breath to the physical sensations of movement. Yoga seeks to deliberately open the body's energy channels and let it all flow unhindered. Or at least that's the horizon line we move towards, even if we never fully arrive. What allows this opening to happen is the same quality that allows it to happen in meditation: equanimity. You notice where in your body you are holding tension, and you breath into it, you relax – deliberately and systematically. You find the dignity in the posture even as you shake with exertion. It's a brilliant practice because it prepares you for life. If you can find equanimity and balance under these strained and artificial circumstances, then you can find it in the office, or at home, or on the street, when you're not twisted around like a reef knot.

Part of the practice of yoga is knowing your edge, knowing what your body can and can't do, and only pushing it forward very carefully. The yoga in this retreat will be gentle and smooth, with an emphasis on not straining to gain. We bring our attention to the rich sensuality of our bodies, seeking to match our inner and outer poise.

Creative Expression

Our evenings are spent doing arts-inspired practices. We use theatre, song, writing, drawing, dance, music and more to honour humanistic approaches to insight and connection. They are ways of exploring our natural creativity, to inquire about who and how we are – and how we relate to one another. It's not about being the best, most talented "artiste" in the room, but about allowing ourselves to experiment

with and learn from these different modalities, and reclaim our ability to express ourselves creatively.

Dance and Movement

On some retreats, we incorporate music into a movement practice. Even on retreats when we don't, you're welcome to come into the meditation space anytime it's empty and gambol around. The practice of dance is worth exploring here for a few paragraphs. It cultivates many of the same skills as yoga, except now music and other human beings are in the mix. The equanimity in this case allows us to move smoothly between songs, never missing a beat, for if we're truly in the moment, we're able to let go of the old rhythm and respond to the new.

In our guided movement meditation, we start in stillness and silence. Then we introduce music, noticing how it impacts our body, the feelings it evokes, the way sound moves into and through us. Movement begins slowly, with eyes-closed, curious about the whole experience, including any feelings of horror and self-consciousness. As we start to calibrate to the music, the group dynamic becomes interesting, for everyone else is also calibrating in their own often highly unusual ways. We open our eyes and begin to move as one body, sharing in the music's peaks and troughs even as we step on each other's toes and try desperately to escape to the bathroom. This is the basis of dance culture everywhere, from tribal drumming to tango to trance. We lose ourselves, only to find ourselves in a new way.

Mindfulness is so interesting because, with the right prompts, it allows us to observe with curiosity the continuous interplay of self-consciousness and abandon in human social life. It's even more acute on a dance floor. You notice how when you're self-conscious it's harder to be in flow, and this changes the way people relate to you, which of course you also notice, rather desperately, which makes you even more awkward and self-conscious, so that now people seem to be looking at you with contempt (or at least great pity) as you flap your arms like an injured bird and pretend to be having a good time, wishing you could roll yourself into a tight little ball on the floor and wondering why the hell you agreed to this idiotic retreat. Isn't having a mind awesome?

Of course no one is actually paying you any attention whatsoever, since everyone

else is submerged in their own equally self-important psychodramas. At our retreat dance parties, we hack the whole situation by encouraging everyone to work with their self-consciousness, and then do intentionally ridiculous moves like barnyard animals or exaggerated versions of our inner weirdos. This levels the playing field and allows everyone to move with more confidence and ease, which in turn makes everyone more relaxed, until we're all finally on the right side of the human social feedback loop.

All of which is to say, “successful” dancing is not about rhythm and skill. It is about freedom. A successful dancer empowers others to find and express their own freedom, including the freedom to opt out!

Sleep and Dreaming

Exploring consciousness doesn't need to end as we fall asleep. It turns out, when we bring mindfulness to our dreams, they change. They get richer, and fuller, and, sometimes, they get lucid. A lucid dream is when clear waking-style existential awareness flickers on in the tunnel of the dream. It's a real experience, and a profound one – you'll know when you've had one, because it's not like anything else. Once it happens you could say that consciousness has expanded in a way that can never be entirely reversed; your baseline level of mindfulness has spilled over into dreaming, your other night-time life. Some meditators report exactly this shift.

Mindfulness is about bringing more awareness to all the ways we operate unconsciously. It starts with insights about our various habits and biases, but doesn't stop there. If we keep going, awareness can begin to work on the “wrapper” itself – on the full sensorium, on our fundamental experience of reality. At a certain point, people from very different traditions report a common insight: waking is a kind of dream. It's a dream in the sense that it's a construction built from our bottom-up aggregated sensory input, which itself is shaped by our top-down biases and expectations and attitudes. This latter can be seen quite vividly in the dreamscape, where there is no bottom-up sensory input to dilute consciousness (because we're asleep and not paying attention to the external world); it's almost all top-down, our reactive patterns and secret biases and emotional conditioning running free in the dream like escaped felons.

None of this is a purely intellectual insight by the way; it's experiential.

Mindfulness over time, in both waking and dreaming, gives us a startling vantage from which to watch our conditioning ebb and flow, deepening and loosening, a natural process like any other. It is from this broader and more intimate perspective that we learn to live our lives.



Celebrate

ACTIVATE

We mean different things when we talk about “Activate” at the CEC: sometimes we mean energize, sometimes we mean socialize, and sometimes we mean service. They are all connected.

One way to think about the long-term progress of meditation and spiritual practice is it’s about finding the right balance of stillness and energy. We meditate to quiet our minds and get insight, yes, but most of us aren't interested in having boring dial tones in our brains. We want zing, not quietude; luminosity, not dullness; Zen sprightliness, not the zombie shuffle. Of course some people just want the peace and that’s their prerogative – life is hard enough, God knows we can all use more tranquility.

Just don’t forget that more comprehensive transformations do exist. We run the “Activate” sections of the retreat with this in mind, explorations of spontaneity and action and intuition. These practices are also social, for it is often only in relationship that we can see how we are blocked and constrained, how we deflect our energy and limit our expression. In both the Celebrate and the Activate sessions we have an opportunity to explore meditative insights in action.

What do we do with all this newfound energy? There seems to be really only one job in life. The specifics look different for everyone, but the core principle is roughly the same: to express our gifts in service.

This can be hard to do in practice. It takes time to get clear about what actions fulfill us; more time to find a forum to express them (particularly a paid forum); and even more time to realize it was never about us in the first place. We start out imagining life’s “rewards” are all about getting: money, status, pleasure. But as we begin to pay more attention, we notice a subtler and fuller pleasure in giving. Love given without expectation of return is a reward that actually seems to last. Once you start to go down this road, it creates another one of those feedback loops: the more we give, the more nourishment we get in return, and thus the more we have to give all over again – including giving to ourselves (for we are exactly as deserving of care as everyone else).

It all sounds like a Hallmark card. And the weird thing is, it seems that some

Hallmark cards are true. This is something intellectuals have a hard time grokking. They think something is true if it's complicated. That may be the case in the objective world of physical material and, perhaps, everyday psychology. But it is not the case in the subjective world of spiritual experience. The trajectory of truth in meditation practice seems to get deeper and more elemental and more universal, a progression of understanding that Buddhists call "insight" and the rest of us call "maturity." Which means relatively simple folks often "get it" far sooner than over-thinking eggheads, a delicious irony that really can't be savoured and appreciated enough (although it also has a tragic underbelly: it means the adjudicators of high culture often overlook or denigrate the very spiritual sustenance they – and everyone else – most need).

The Community is the Teacher

This principle is one of the foundations of what we do at the CEC. Everyone is a "teacher" insofar as they are honest about their own experience. That's why we put such a premium on group sharing and discussion. When we open up in this way, we create openings for others in similar predicaments and temperaments. You could say we all teach our own healing, that our personal suffering can begin to lift as we learn to transmute it, alchemically, into insights and care for someone else.

In this sense, anyone can be a "teacher." Our own experience is the only authority we need. The more honest we are about our own challenges, the more of service we can actually be.

There are certain environments that make this kind of sharing maximally possible. On this retreat we try to stick to the principles of active listening: open, respectful, sensitive to tone and body language. We don't jump in to fix or rescue; nor do we confront or challenge. We use "I" statements and speak from our own experience, careful not to layer our statements with ideas and interpretation and long-winded philosophical rants about the nature of reality. The idea is to make space for people to come to their own understanding, in their own way.

Being of Service

In this retreat we have regular periods of "selfless service," where we practice the

habit of giving back. There are a number of recurring tasks that need doing: bell ringing, sit leading, guiding the moving meditations and the like. We will have sign up sheets for all of these, so that everyone will have some job to do each day of the retreat.

This is the practice of generosity. It is also a mindfulness practice. You notice the natural contractions that emerge: subtle resentments, certain conditions you “require” to feel appreciated, the many annoyances of working with other humans, who aren’t acting in the way you would prefer humans to act.

All of which is perfectly fine, of course. But as we keep saying, the momentum of meditation is an opportunity to notice your various greatest-hits, to observe your patterns of thinking and acting with curiosity, without getting pulled into each story. This ability to pan back awareness = more freedom. Do we want to reinforce this particular habit of thinking and feeling and relating? We might. But at least now we have more of a choice. And one of these choices is to redirect our attention from the inner world to the outer. To notice instead the feeling of warm water on our hands, the ground beneath our feet, the sound of distant gunshots from the forest, where the retreat guards are stationed beneath the high spools of barbed wire that sparkle like strings of tiny diamonds in the sun. That kind of thing.

Activation is Life

We’re alive, and that aliveness is becoming clearer as we meditate. So many objects of meditation in a single moment: flashes of light, inner sounds, outer crickets. We realize we’re not just alive – we are life. We are simultaneously life’s moving spectacle and witness. Grace.

The feeling of gratitude that can emerge at these times isn’t like the others. I mean it is, but it’s more. It suffuses as it grows. It keeps brimming, magnifying itself – no edge, no bottom, no self. Big love, big compassion, big enough to fill our body and hearts a thousand times over, lifetimes over, big enough to include everyone.

*the pain of life makes me want to protect
everyone if only these black sleeves were wider
deeper oh this crazed world i'd put everyone inside - Ryokan*

How wide are your sleeves? Wide enough for everyone? Before you start inviting

them in, make sure they're wide enough for your own tender self. From there, keep going.

Activate. This is the CEC's third integral piece, the one the others feed into and multiply. Multiplying the potential of your spirit, your particular activity, the unique contribution of all your skills and epigenetic blessings and rivulets of karma. No one's done it like you do it, because no one can.

Activate is not a prescription: Thou must give back the good you've been given. If you don't feel like it, don't. It's fine: hang back, relax. But don't be surprised if the motivation finds you. It often follows from practice. Your hands – your Maker hands – lift from your knees and reach for work. Work that makes it easier for others to share whatever small or large freedom you've found.

Doesn't have to be a big work, or a new work. Could be you just want to go more deeply and mindfully into the work you're already doing – your job work, your family work, your extra-curricular work. All activities influence our shared world. In Buddhism this is called prittitayasamathpada, co-arising, emergence – the interdependence of all things. Indra's net, everything woven, moving jewels, your place in the net as essential as any person who has lived or ever will, of exact and equal importance.



Activate

Returning Home

“And the end of all our exploring Will be to arrive where we started And know the place for the first time.” - TS Eliot, Four Quartets

Returning home, you might feel more peaceful, more raw, or exactly the same. Perfect!

The first is easy. The second can be challenging. Our new clarity can reveal things we'd rather not see – about ourselves, about the world. These insights smooth out with time. Practice helps. Continuity is more important than length: a daily meditation practice to check in and get settled, at a duration and pace that works for us. As mentioned, we know a meditation is “working” not by the particular effects when we sit, but by how we actually are in our lives.

For all this it helps to be part of a community. People with whom we can share practice insights and experiences and techniques, who can give us feedback and perspective. If you're in Toronto, we meet every Monday night. Meditation is popular enough these days that sitting groups can be found in most cities and towns. There are many good groups in Toronto. The CEC offers material on our website about how to start your own sitting group should you wish, sharing some of what we've learned about how to support people without becoming a cult. Sign up for our newsletter to stay in touch.

Meditate, but also celebrate. Come to our parties. Throw some of your own. Activate. Deepen your work. Help us deepen ours.

And keep exploring. Every moment is an ending and a beginning – an explorer-sized space made just for you.

With love,

Jeff Warren, James Maskalyk, Erin Oke