

Beyond Mindfulness: Western Meditation Techniques in Theory and Practice

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Additional Resources & References

Stoic Pre-Meditation

Epictetus discusses a version of this activity in *Discourses* 3.8;¹ Marcus Aurelius has some encouragement in *Meditations* 2.1 and 10.13.²

Set aside a few minutes in your day—perhaps first thing in the morning, as many of the ancient Stoics suggested, or perhaps at another time which better suits your schedule. During that time, consider one affectively intense thing which might happen to you. The ancient Stoics tended to focus on things which present themselves very negatively to most ordinary people: for example, Epictetus’ examples included the theft of a valued object (the lamp which stood at the shrine of his household Gods), and the death of one’s spouse or child.

Yet Stoic tranquility does not only apply to those parts of life. There is also the challenge of remaining fixed in ourselves, in the face of affectively positive things: the birth of a child, an unexpected windfall or promotion at work, the experience of falling in love. It seems to me that most of us are just as likely to be carried away by these affectively positive experiences, as by the affectively negative ones, and so I recommend alternating between apparent goods and apparent evils or harms, on different days, when using this technique.

Once you have made your selection, imagine that thing, or that event, fully and vividly, as if you were experiencing it right now. Then step back mentally, and ask yourself:

- Is this something that is up to me (that is, within my sphere of choice)?
- Does it affect my power of choice, or only my body and possessions?
- Does this appear (un)pleasant because it really is that way (for everyone, at all times), or is the sense of being (un)pleasant something which I add to it, through my own beliefs and judgments?
- If my beliefs and judgments are making the situation more (un)pleasant: Why do I hold these beliefs, and what other judgments might I choose to make?
- What choices can I make, with regard to how I respond to this event?

Take as long as you need to reflect on these questions, then imagine yourself doing whatever is within your power, to respond to the situation in the best possible way. This might involve, like Epictetus, saying “That is outside the sphere of choice, so it is nothing bad,” or “You may seem bad, but you are only an impression, not under my control.” It may involve taking actions which are under your control, in a way which preserves your freedom and integrity. Or you may see other ways of responding effectively.

Whatever response you have imagined, ask yourself, “Do I see how to maintain my integrity and freedom?”

1 Epictetus, *Discourses, Fragments, Handbook*, trans. Robin Hard (Oxford World's Classics, 2014), pp. 159–60.

2 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Gregory Hays (Modern Library, 2002), pp. 17 & 136.

Pythagorean Daily Recollection

Though he would not call himself a Pythagorean, Seneca offers a nice discussion of this activity in his treatise *On Anger (De Ira)*, book III, chapter 36 (trans. John Basore):³

“Anger will cease and become more controllable if it finds that it must appear before a judge every day. Can anything be more excellent than this practice of thoroughly sifting the whole day? And how delightful the sleep that follows this self-examination—how tranquil it is, how deep and untroubled, when the soul has either praised or admonished itself, and when this secret examiner and critic of self has given report of its own character! I avail myself of this privilege, and every day I plead my cause before the bar of self. When the light has been removed from sight, and my wife, long aware of my habit, has become silent, I scan the whole of my day and retrace all my deeds and words. I conceal nothing from myself, I omit nothing. For why should I shrink from any of my mistakes, when I may commune thus with myself?”

Of course, the benefits of this activity can apply not only to anger, but to other intense emotional states, and to many other parts of our intellectual, spiritual, and ethical lives.

As the last thing you do before falling asleep in the evening, recall the events and choices of the day, starting with the moment you got into bed, and continuing in reverse order from the end of the day to the beginning. As you go, note the places where events were outside your control, and the places where you had the opportunity to make choices about what to think, say, or do. Don't worry if you fall asleep; just go as far back as you can, until you doze off.

Once you have been doing this for a while, you may find patterns emerging in the way that you often respond (or fail to respond) to certain people, events, feelings, places, or situations. Make note of these situations, and consider using them as starting points for the premeditation activity. Pay attention to which parts of your day are within your control, and which parts are not. With practice, you may find yourself with a greater ability to note challenging situations at the moment they arise, so that you can respond from a place of freedom, rather than habit or compulsion.

While it's helpful to note which parts of your day were good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, conducive to flourishing (*eudaimonia*) or not, try not to get caught up in praising or blaming yourself. (This is subtly, but importantly, different from the emphasis that Seneca gives in the quote above. He was writing prior to the neuroses that can arise from self-flagellation by “sinners in the hands of an angry God.” In his time and place, the concern was people who were too uncritical, not people who were over-critical.) Instead, ***focus on observing the patterns*** of your life, so that you can keep hold of the patterns which serve you well, and change the ones which do not. Once they are done, past actions are no longer under our control; but what is under our control is how we intend to act in the future.

3 Seneca, *On Anger*, translated by John Basore. Loeb Classical Library, online at <https://archive.org/details/moralessayswiththe01seneuoft/page/106/mode/2up>.

Some Platonic Gymnastics

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates offers us a basic (yet complex!) set of questions for examining the nature of things:

Must one not, therefore, think in the following way about the nature of anything? First, to consider whether that thing is simple [i.e., not composed of parts] or multi-form, about which we wish to be skillful ourselves, and to be able to make anyone else skillful? And next, if it is simple, to consider its power: what power does it naturally have for acting in relation to what, or what power for suffering [i.e., being acted upon] from what? And if it has many forms, having enumerated these, to see this very same thing regarding each, that one saw regarding a single one: by what does it naturally do what, or by what does it naturally suffer what from what?⁴

So, taking anything at all which might be a part of the cosmos, we have three questions which present themselves for our consideration, once we have sufficiently clarified our terms:

1. If x is simple, what else would have to be the case? How would x affect, and be affected by, other things?
2. If x is composite (made of many parts), what else would have to be the case? How would each part/element of x affect, and be affected by, other things and one another?
3. If x is not, what else would have to be the case?



As an example, let's think about the soul. Before we can even begin to answer the three questions, we'll need to define what we mean by this polyvalent word.

Lest someone worry that we're somehow "prejudicing" the investigation by choosing one definition over another, remember that we're interested in *things themselves*; words are just a tool to point us toward them. So if there are competing definitions of "soul" on offer, we can simply devote a different day's meditation to each of them: on the first day, ask "If the soul *as understood in this way* is simple, what follows?", etc.; on the next day, ask "If the soul *as understood in this other particular way* is simple, what follows?", and so on.

Today, let's take the classical Greek definition: the soul is whatever it is that is the animating principle of bodies: that which generates motion from within itself, and imparts motion to other things.

Now, we can progress through the three questions. If there is such a thing, what does that mean for physical bodies—both bodies that might be "connected" to a particular soul, and other distinct bodies? Here we're looking *downstream*, to see what effects soul would have on body. In Plato's terms, we're investigating the soul's "power for acting" on other things.

We can also look *upstream*: If there were a soul of this kind, would there need to be other things, other realities in the world? Perhaps something that is not moved at all (neither by itself, like the soul, nor by other things, like bodies)? Why would we need them? What would they do? In Plato's terms, what does the soul "suffer" or undergo from outside itself?

⁴ Plato, *Phaedrus* 270c-d, translated by James H. Nichols, Jr., slightly modified.

Having exhausted the first question, we can now consider: what if the soul is multiple? Perhaps each person's body is associated, not just with a single soul, but with several?⁵ In addition to asking what this would mean for bodies (downstream) and for higher things (upstream), we might also ask, how would these souls have to relate to one another? What would they need to be like, to make this picture work? We're now looking neither upstream nor downstream, but in a "side-by-side" way.

And finally, if there were no soul—nothing that was the source of its own motion and giver of motion to other things—what would the cosmos need to be like? Where would the motion of bodies come from? Would we have a beginningless series of things getting moved by others? A circle? Some other arrangement? And so on.

Depending how much detail you go into with each question, you might decide to explore all three questions within a single session of meditation, or you might take one question per day, over three successive days. Both approaches are fine; what's important for this exercise is that you give equal consideration to all three questions, without neglecting any of them.



We can, of course, ask this style of questions about nearly anything. On another day, we might consider virtue: If virtue is one single thing, the same wherever it appears, what follows? If there are many different virtues, what follows, in general, and for each virtue? If there's no such thing as virtue, what follows?



One important point of this activity is simply to get ourselves used to thinking in deliberate, structured ways. While we are certainly cultivating our powers of concentration (by staying on topic, and "rewinding" our train of thought when we get lost), we're also stripping away the veils that hide the structure of the world, and the veils that cover over our own misunderstanding and ignorance. In all of these senses, the activity is "gymnastic": the Greek term *gymnos* means "naked," and the gymnasium takes its name from the ancient Greek habit of wrestling and conducting other athletic contests totally uncovered, in the nude!

This activity will also require many iterations: both to accustom ourselves to the method, and to refine both our definitions and our conclusions, as our understanding matures over time. So, like physical gymnastics, this exercise occupies a middle place. The athlete is striving for a real and measurable goal: to complete a full marathon, to clear a certain high-jump bar, etc. But he also knows that even if he falls short of that goal (at least for now), his training has nonetheless put him into a place of greater strength, stamina, and general fitness and well-being.

Likewise, as philosophically-inclined meditators, we're very much striving for the truth, for a more accurate understanding of how the world fits together. Yet we're also able to accept that we may—at least so far—fall short of fully achieving that goal, while nonetheless strengthening our powers of attention, understanding, and reasoning. And just as the athlete must "use it or lose it," we too need consistent, regular practice to sustain the fruits of our meditative practice.

5 These different souls might, for example, be associated with different functions, or different parts of the personality.

Resources & Bibliography

For concerns about contemporary mindfulness meditation from within Buddhism, one useful collection of essays is *What's Wrong with Mindfulness (And What Isn't): Zen Perspectives*, edited by Robert Meikyo Rosenbaum and Barry Magid (Wisdom Publications, 2016), which is available from the Lewis & Clark Public Library.

Of particular note is Robert Scharf's essay in this volume, "Is Mindfulness Buddhist? (And Why it Matters)", which is also available from the author's website, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7264r9wq>.



The most in-depth scientific studies of the risks associated with contemporary mindfulness are the work of Brown University professor Willoughby Britton and her collaborators in the "Varieties of Contemplative Experience" project. The project website, with many of their findings, is <https://www.brown.edu/research/labs/britton/research/varieties-contemplative-experience>.

Dr. Britton is also the founder of Cheetah House, which provides resources and support (personal and group-based) for people who have suffered adverse affects from mindfulness practice. Their website is <https://www.cheetahhouse.org/>. They have quite a lot of free resources available, and their fee-based one-on-one services are on a sliding scale, to make them as widely available as possible.

While I have no direct connection with Cheetah House, based on everything I've seen of their work, I would strongly encourage anyone who might need their support—meditators who may be suffering adverse effects from their practice, or their family members—to reach out to them.



My own perspective (based in my personal practice) situates meditation and contemplation within the Platonic philosophical and spiritual tradition. The two best books, of which I am aware, for presenting that tradition from the point of view of a living practice, are *The Unfolding Wings: The Way of Perfection in the Platonic Tradition*, by my colleague Tim Addey (2nd edition, Prometheus Trust, 2011) and *Discovering the Beauty of Wisdom: Embracing Mysticism through the Ancient Path of Greek Philosophy* by Mindy Mandell (Prometheus Trust, 2020).

Both authors are solidly grounded in the history of the tradition, but their focus is on lived practice, rather than merely doing historical scholarship for its own sake. Mandell in particular includes a lot of personal anecdotes from her own life of study and practice.

While I'm largely in agreement with what both authors are doing, there are some places where we disagree, either in substance or in emphasis—and I believe that diversity of perspectives is a good thing!

I distribute and sell both of these books (so, I have a material/financial interest); I'm also happy to provide a discount to students from the workshop who might be interested in them. Just speak to me in person, or drop me an email.

