

## Chapter Eight

### *Freedom from Fear: A 7-Day Practice*

It's easy to become convinced of the value of meditation, generosity, patience, and so on. But what happens when, based on theory alone, you try to bring these qualities into everyday life? If you're like me, not much. I need to *practice* these skills over and over before they begin to make sense beyond theory. This program is meant to lead you through the steps that create genuine and lasting change. Now is the time to put a stake in the ground, take action and see how (or if) these ideas work in your life. You don't have to wait for the perfect day or until you quit smoking or lose ten pounds before beginning a meditation practice that cultivates gentleness, delight, confidence, and joy. The optimum time is right now. Once you make the commitment to explore these practices, the necessary support will come to you from everywhere you look. When you set out on the path, the path begins to materialize, but not before.

The 7 Day Freedom from Fear Meditation Program in this chapter explains how to build meditation and a meditative point of view into your everyday life. It begins with an intensive, solitary 36-hour retreat away from your everyday life, and then includes 4 days back home where you weave *Shamatha* meditation, journaling, and contemplative activities into your daily life.

I realize that finding the time and space to spend 36 hours by yourself is asking a lot and may even seem a bit frightening. You could do this program without taking a 36-hour break from your daily life, but not doing so will weaken the program's

transformative power. It's very important to step outside of the normal flow of your life for the perspective it offers. Please try to find a way to give yourself this gift. You totally deserve it.

### *Overview*

As mentioned, this is a 7-day program that begins with an intensive, 36-hour retreat during which time you will separate yourself from your daily life and immerse yourself in meditation, journaling and reflective practices. For the remaining four and one half days you will return to your usual routine but you will begin and end each day with some of the practices you have done intensely during your solo retreat. The idea is that you will become familiar with these practices and learn how to incorporate them into your everyday life.

### *Before You Begin*

It will be really, incredibly, indescribably helpful if you begin a meditation practice *before* undertaking on this program. This way, you'll have familiarized yourself with what it feels like to sit for ten to twenty minutes, how to take the posture in a way that's comfortable, how to place your attention on your breath. When the 7-day program begins, you'll be able to settle in much more quickly.

I once heard the writer Julia Cameron say, "The first rule of magic is containment," and this is an important concept to bear in mind. Often we think that the way to begin a new program, whether it's a dietary change, a workout routine, or a

spiritual practice, is to talk to some friends, read a few books, maybe take a class, and then give it a shot. But there is an additional element that is important to your success: the form you create to stabilize your efforts. Without the proper environment and an intelligent plan, the excitement and energy of a new endeavor can dissipate rather quickly.

The schedule is the container for this program. It will create the form and structure that will allow the energy to build. Without this containment, there is no energy or magic. So following the program as carefully as you can is very important.

### *The Retreat*

In order to take a decisive look at your fears and lay the foundation for fearlessness, some distance from everyday life is required. So, the program requires you to be alone for the first 36 hours of the seven day, from 5 PM on day one until 12 noon on day three. You'll step out of your life completely and spend one day and two nights by yourself with no contact with family, friends, or colleagues. This is very important. Often, our routines define our self-image and dictate what we think about and react to. During this 36-hour period, you'll be thinking about yourself—nothing else You'll take a panoramic view of your own life. You'll give careful thought to what you're frightened of, the effect it has on your life, and who you might be without these fears. You'll immerse yourself in meditation and other contemplative practices. You'll relax with yourself, by yourself, for yourself. I realize that taking this much time away from family

and responsibilities may be asking a lot, but trust me, it's crucial. You may have to get creative to make it happen, but you can do it.

Before you begin, let those closest to you know you'll be engaged in this program for seven days. Ask for their understanding and support. Tell them you may not be able to respond to phone calls or emails immediately. As much as possible, prepare these things in advance and lean on family, friends, or roommates to handle your usual daily responsibilities. If you are responsible for grocery shopping, stock the pantry in advance. Find someone to walk the dog, pick up the dry cleaning, and pay the bills. (At the end of the program you can buy them a present or do something nice for them in return.)

Each day will end by dedicating the merit of your practice to others.

### *Location*

The ideal spot to spend these thirty-six hours would be a spiritual retreat center or health spa—if it's within your budget and geographically convenient. These locations are specifically designed to support a contemplative lifestyle. (See page TK for a list of some centers.) Next best would be staying a hotel for two nights; that would be great. It doesn't matter (on the spiritual plane) if it's the Four Seasons or Motel 6. Another option would be house sitting for two days or borrow a vacationing friend's house. If you simply can't afford to leave your house for financial or familial reasons, maybe you can find a way to get the house to yourself for 36 hours. If none of these are options, not to worry. Perhaps you can commandeer the living room or even make your own room off limits to others for the intensive period. If you're in a relationship, it won't kill your partner to sleep on

the couch for two nights. Your roommates will survive if you decline going out with them for two nights. The idea is to create a safe, nurturing, and solitary space, free from everyday distractions and worries.

If you have no choice but to do this program at home, take special care to stash things that relate to your day-to-day responsibilities. This is not the time to catch up on bill paying or to go over the notes from the last staff meeting. Make sure that all of your favorite distractions are out of reach. This includes your computer, Sidekick or Blackberry-type devices, the television or radio, magazines, and, as we'll see below, all books except the two we'll discuss. (See page TK.)

If you aren't a fan of being alone, the prospect of 36 hours with yourself might seem daunting. If you think you need the support of others or just a bit of companionship so you won't go stir-crazy, try going without and see if it's true. Facing your fear begins with facing yourself, which, along with being scary, exhilarating, and possibly confusing and boring, can also be incredibly grounding. Avoid setting up little escape hatches like just one phone call to your boyfriend or a mere 30 minutes in front of the TV. It's important to dedicate yourself to this process wholeheartedly.

### *Right Space*

Creating the right space has nothing to do with setting up the perfect meditation space or having the best incense. It has more to do with the ambient qualities your intention and discipline bring to your surroundings. Every space has its own feeling-tone

that informs what transpires in that space. If you hear a sad story in a church, it sounds different than it would in a bar or on a submarine. Waking up in a neat and orderly room engenders a different mood than waking up in an unkempt one. Walking through a field at night feels very different than walking through it at noon on a sunny day. Why? The answer is in the space itself. It's a very interesting concept. The space that contains the activities alters the direction of the activity, and vice versa.

### *Scheduling*

Find a week that contains the possibility of getting away for 36 hours and then returning to your normal schedule. If you can do so immediately—great. If it takes six months to find a break in your schedule, that's fine too. Putting it on the calendar actually sets the process in motion. Friday evening to Sunday lunch may work best, or you might want to wait until a holiday break and do it midweek.

### *Retreat Program*

Each of the seven days will include meditation, a journaling, and various contemplative exercises. The first 36 hours introduces you to each of the practices and is considerably more intense. The remaining four-and-a-half days will follow the same schedule: morning meditation, “free writing”, a daily contemplation exercise, and an evening journaling assignment. It's very important to follow the schedule as it is laid out. It's better not to do the program unless you can commit to all seven days. The days are scheduled to build on each other and if you limit them or spread them out, you will lose momentum. You can expect to go about your daily life but should be able to make time

on each of these days for the practices suggested. In other words, choose a week where you expect little outside your regular routine, for example, try for a seven day period without out-of-town guests or unusually important deadlines.

### *Food*

The program has a dietary component, although not a complicated one: you don't have to give up meat, coffee or sugar, or only eat organic vegetables, but please simplify the foods you eat during the retreat week and, if you can, for a few days in advance of the retreat start date, so you don't have to spend a lot of time during the retreat figuring out a new food shopping or preparation routine. This will leave more energy to devote to the contemplative exercises.

For these seven days, the only rule is to eat good quality foods. This means nothing packaged, processed, or genetically-engineered. You don't have to change what you eat or drink, just make sure it's of good quality. If you drink coffee, buy organic beans. If you want to eat candy bars, get some good quality organic chocolate. If you must eat a ham sandwich for lunch everyday, make it nitrate-free and on whole grain bread. Instead of sugared cereals for breakfast, try a granola that isn't too sweet. You'll be able to find what you need at a health food store or do the best you can at your regular grocery store. For beverages, stick with water, milk, and fruit or vegetable juices. Avoid soda unless you'll spend the whole week with a headache if you don't get your diet cola. If you hate to cook and only eat takeout, buy your to-go food from a health-conscious establishment. If you're staying at a hotel where you can't control the food, either bring

your own or order the healthiest things on the menu. (If you're fortunate enough to spend this time at a retreat center or health spa, you won't have to worry about the food.) This is not a diet by any means, and you don't have to get overly-strict with yourself, but try to cut as many chemicals as you can from what you are eating. This will leave your mind clearer.

No alcohol or drugs because these substances such as these can make meditation very confusing. If you have an alcohol or drug problem or are undergoing medical or psychiatric treatment, please don't start this program. Consult your doctor and wait for a time when you are able to devote your attention to it fully.

If you are taking prescription medications, of course you should continue to take them, as per your doctor's instructions.

If you have any concern whatsoever about this program, please check with a health professional before beginning it.

### *Supplies*

You'll need some supplies for the week. If you want, you can make a "retreat kit" for yourself. Place these items in a beautiful gift box or purchase attractive wrapping paper to cover a regular cardboard box. The box should be big enough to hold the following:

A blank journal

Pens and/or pencils

A small alarm clock

A self-addressed, stamped envelope (to write a letter to yourself)

Two books

In addition to this book (which you'll need as a reference), plan to bring two others. Nothing about how to get over a broken heart, lose 10 pounds in 10 minutes, and no Harlequin romances or mystery novels. No self-help or guilty-pleasure books. They should be about meditation, spirituality, prayer, faith, or any other topic that will teach and inspire you as you make this inward journey. (When I first went on retreat, I took "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind" by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi and it was very helpful. I also enjoyed "Turning the Mind Into an Ally" by Sakyong Mipham.)

I'm not suggesting these types of books because you need to be deadly serious during the retreat. I suggest them because they will help keep you focused and allow your mind to become quiet. (See page TK for suggestions.)

*Sacred Object*

Bring something that you feel represents the highest wisdom imaginable, your best self, or God. It could be a photo or statuette of a deity, a smooth stone from a walk or a vacation where you felt particularly alive, or a picture of someone you greatly admire. It could be a flower, a shell, or a framed printout of a poem. Make it something of personal significance.

### *An offering*

Also bring an offering to your own wisdom mind or highest self, as symbolized by your sacred object. There are many things you could choose to offer: the delicate scent of a candle or incense, a bouquet of fresh flowers, a treasured book, or a few river stones. You could offer a small dish of candy. It should be something simple.

### *Walking shoes*

### *Art supplies (optional)*

If you like to draw or paint, you might want to bring colored pencils, charcoal, pens, a small set of watercolors to use as you journal. Keep it simple.

### *iPod (optional)*

If you can make a quiet playlist on your iPod and promise to listen to it only, then you can bring your tunes to listen to on your daily walk.

BOXED TEXT

## *Quiet Playlist*

Taste in music is very personal, so what I find relaxing and beautiful, you might find boring. Whether you like Sinatra or Madonna, Bach or Wu Tang, choose slow tempo, spare tunes.

Here's what works for me.

Tabula Rasa Arvo Part

Kothbiro Ayub Ogada

Blackbird Beatles

Too Long at the Fair Bonnie Raitt

You Changed My Life Charles Brown

My Funny Valentine Chet Baker

Duende Delerium

Skylark Dianne Reeves

You Don't Know What Love Is Dinah Washington

Blue Gardenia Dinah Washington

In The Evening When The Sun Goes Down Ella Fitzgerald

Someone To Watch Over Me Frank Sinatra

In The Wee Small Hours Frank Sinatra

Wichita Lineman Glen Campbell

Copperline James Taylor

Carolina James Taylor  
Ammeh Kimia Jamshied Sharifi  
My One and Only Love John Coltrane & Johnny Hartman  
You are Too Beautiful John Coltrane & Johnny Hartman  
Moonlight In Vermont Johnny Hartman  
Live To Tell Madonna  
Whats Going On Marvin Gaye  
Body & Soul Mel Torme  
Round Midnight Mel Torme  
Mary Patty Griffin  
Indigo Burrell Ronnie Earl  
In A Landscape William Orbit  
Suite No. 1 in G major, S.1007 Prélude Yo-Yo Ma  
Suite No. 1 in G major, S.1007 Allemande Yo-Yo Ma  
Suite No. 1 in G major, S.1007 Courante Yo-Yo Ma  
Suite No. 1 in G major, S.1007 Sarabande Yo-Yo Ma  
Suite No. 1 in G major, S.1007 Menuett Yo-Yo Ma  
Suite No. 1 in G major, S.1007 Gigue Yo-Yo Ma  
END BOXED TEXT

*Yoga Mat (optional)*

If you have a yoga practice, by all means, bring a mat. But no DVDs. Remember, you won't be watching TV at all. If you want to do yoga, do the poses you know and are

comfortable performing. Recreate the sequence of the poses from memory or as feels best to you.

### *Meditation Cushion (optional)*

If you have a meditation cushion, you could bring that. It would be best to bring that. If not, you can use a chair, sofa cushions, or even the bed as your meditation spot.

Don't overthink your selections. Go with your gut and you'll find you have what you need when you need it. Keep this simple and relaxed.

When you have chosen a start date, gathered your supplies, and figured out how to meet your dietary needs, you're ready to begin.

## THE PROGRAM

### *Day One*

#### *The Day of Slowing Down*

“Quiet minds cannot be perplexed or frightened but go on in fortune or misfortune at their own private pace, like a clock during a thunderstorm.” Robert Louis Stevenson

All spiritual practice begins with slowing down, letting the concerns of everyday life drop away, and turning one's attention inward. This evening, allow your body to slow down. If you're not at home, don't rush through unpacking. When you sit down to journal or meditate, take your seat gently. Don't multi-task. Do one thing at a time. Breathe

deeply. Allow your mind to slow down. Know that for the next 36 hours, you're going to let your mind rest quietly. When body and mind slow down, the spirit comes forward.

As you begin the program, realize that learning these practices could mark a turning point in your life, so really go for it. "Leap, and the net will appear," as the saying goes. You can trust that when you take your first step, even if it appears to be into thin air, the net begins readying itself to catch you. The leap and the net come into existence at the same time. So as you do this inner work, the world around you seems magically to create the circumstances and coincidences that will support you best.

*5 PM*

The program Whether you're in your bedroom, a friend's house, a hotel, or retreat center, do what you can to make sure your space will be ready for you by 5PM of the first evening. There is nothing magical about 5PM, but it's helpful to have a clearly delineated start time and begin your retreat with a sense of discipline. If it's your bedroom, make sure that you've cleaned up and put away distracting or irritating things. Whether you're at home, a friend's house, or a hotel, make sure you have the groceries you'll need for the entire 36 hours. If you're going to a friend's house, take care to have checked out and prepared the space beforehand. Come a little early to do so but be ready by 6 PM.

If you're at a hotel, ask that your room be located in a quiet spot. Unplug the telephone. Turn off your cell and stash it—you won't need it for 36 hours. Cover the TV

with a blanket or swivel it around to face a wall. When you shut the door, it should feel good—safe, but maybe even a little exciting.

Unpack your retreat box. Create a shrine by placing the photo, statue, or object that represent your highest wisdom somewhere neat and clean. A bookshelf, bedside table, or window sill are good. Since this object represents what is most precious to you, you don't want to place this item on the floor, in a closet, or amidst a bunch of cookie crumbs. Next, place your offering next to or in front of your item. Do so with a sense of gratitude for this gift of solitude and quiet.

Choose a spot for your meditation. It could be facing your shrine or not. If you have a cushion, set it up somewhere in a clean and, if possible, out-of-the-way spot. If this isn't possible, it's no big deal. Simply decide where you're going to sit and be prepared to set your cushion there during meditation periods. If you aren't using a traditional cushion, decide whether you'll be sitting on a chair, a sofa, or the bed. If it's chair or sofa, make sure you it's one you can sit up straight in, back unsupported, feet on the floor. If you're going to sit on the bed, figure out a way to stack pillows so that you can sit comfortably but upright. You could sit cross-legged or on the edge of the bed or with your feet on the floor. If your feet don't reach the floor, stack some pillows or cushions under them to bring your knees level with or slightly above your hips.

Unpack your clothes, toiletries, groceries, and so on

*6PM*

Open your journal. For your first journaling exercise, take about twenty minutes (or longer if you wish) to make note of what your senses are able to take. For now, leave your feelings behind, forget about whatever motivated you to do this program, and look around you. What do your surroundings look like? What type of furniture does it contain? What are you sitting or lying on, and how does it feel? Is it comfortable? What colors can you see? What can you smell or hear? How does it feel to be in this room—not how do you feel, but how does the room feel—is it serene, jumbled, warm, plain? Does it feel like a happy, unhappy, or neutral place to be? Note how your body feels. Scan from your feet to your head and jot down whatever you notice. “The bottoms of my feet hurt. My back is so comfortable against these pillows. My chest feels warm. My eyeglasses are pinching the bridge of my nose a teeny tiny bit.” And so on. This is a way of attuning to your environment and settling into it by making contact with its energy through the placement of your attention. When you’re finished, set your journal aside and get ready for dinner.

Dinner should either be prepared already, or easy to prepare. Whether you cooked in advance, picked something up to go, or need to cook now, keep it simple and nourishing. It shouldn’t take more than 30 minutes to prepare, nor should it be a bag of cookies or chips. Eat something you know is basically good for you. As you eat, you can read whatever you brought for pleasure, or do nothing but taste your food.

Clean up.

Take a 20-minute walk after dinner, unless it's freezing cold or you're in a dangerous neighborhood. Walk around the block. Take your time. This walk isn't meant to be athletic. Walking is an uncomplicated way to connect with your body and digest your food. If you're on familiar turf and you have an iPod, you can listen to your quiet playlist while you walk. Otherwise, pay attention to your breath and take in your surroundings.

*7PM*

Get your journal out again and make yourself comfortable. During this exercise, you'll be turning your attention inward to begin a dialog with yourself. The following sentences are like little prayers requesting the blessings of whomever or whatever you believe to be the source of blessings. If you have no such beliefs, this is fine. If it's more comfortable to you, don't think of them as prayers, look at them as markers that set your intentions in motion, little ways of telling yourself the truth about what's really on your mind. What you write should be fairly simple and straightforward. Don't rush but don't spend an inordinate amount of time until you find the perfect words, either. Write what comes to mind. You can always tweak this later.

Please help me to \_\_\_\_\_ so that I may \_\_\_\_\_.

Please guide me to \_\_\_\_\_ so that I may \_\_\_\_\_.

Please show me \_\_\_\_\_ so that I may \_\_\_\_\_.

Please teach me \_\_\_\_\_ so that I may \_\_\_\_\_.

Here are some examples of things you might say:

Please help me to quit smoking so that I may be healthy.

Please guide me to the people or circumstances who can help me find a job doing work I really love so that I may express myself fully.

Please show me how to talk with my sister so that I may stop fighting with her.

Please teach me how to have confidence so that I may ask for what I'm worth.

Keep it simple, but if you're inspired to elaborate, feel free. You can use a sentence a page explaining each one. In either case, be sure to fill in the blanks.

Now, dedicate your prayers or wishes so that they may serve others, too. If it's helpful, go back to page TK and reread the explanation of the Dedication of Merit. Spend a few moments composing your wish that whatever benefit may have accrued through these exercises also be put to work for the benefit of others. It can be as simple as, "I hope that what I learn can serve others," "I don't know how, but may my work here be helpful to others," or "I dedicate whatever good has arisen today to a higher power."

You could use the following traditional verses used as dedications of merit if you like:

By this merit may all attain omniscience.

May it defeat the enemy, wrongdoing,  
from the stormy waves of birth, old age, sickness, and death.  
From the ocean of samsara,  
may I free all beings.

The important thing is that your generosity be genuine. Touch in with the natural tenderness you touched on during *Maitri* meditation and let your words emanate from that feeling.

Now read or relax until bedtime. Choose from either of the books you've brought. Try to get to sleep by 10 or 11.

*Day Two*

*The Day of Self-Remembering*

*But when the self speaks to the self, who is speaking?—the entombed soul, the spirit driven in, in, in to the central catacomb; the self that took the veil and left the world—*  
*Virginia Woolf*

In the rush of everyday life, in trying to meet the demands of family, work, and health, we simply forget who we are. While returning phone calls, reading email, doing errands, taking care of others, *trying* to take care of self—we don't have time to remember who are. Our energy is continually going out, directed at people and tasks.

Today, you turn that energy around and direct it to yourself. With great respect, appreciation, and dignity, turn inward. Let today be the quietest day of your life.

7 AM

Wake up. Fix your coffee or tea.

730A

Shamatha Meditation: 20 minutes

Go to your meditation spot. Bring your small alarm clock and this book, if you want to review the meditation instructions before practicing. I've included a refresher on the key points of practice below. If you have brought a candle or incense, light it. Take a few moments to settle in and find the correct posture. When you feel that you're ready, set your small alarm clock for 20 minutes and begin to practice. When the alarm sounds, turn it off, sit for a few moments before you rise.

Dedicate the merit.

BOXED TEXT:

*Shamatha Instructions*

Find a quiet, comfortable place to sit.

If you are planning to sit on a cushion on the floor, dress in comfortable, loose fitting clothing.

Minimize distractions: turn off the phone, shut the door, and turn off any music or television.

Decide how long your meditation session will be that day. Ten to thirty minutes is great, although you can sit for as long as you like.

Take your seat and review the points of posture: Sit on an even surface, legs crossed comfortably or feet flat on the floor (if on a chair), back is straight but relaxed, hands are resting on the thighs, palms down, eyes are open but soft, gaze is forward and down to a spot a few feet in front of you, mouth is closed but lips are slightly parted.

Before beginning the actual practice, remind yourself what you are doing, that you are about to meditate, that you will give it your all, and that during this brief time everything else can wait.

Now you are ready to start.

END BOXED TEXT

Free Writing

*If you look into your minds, you will see it's like thousands of butterflies whirling about!  
You can hardly trace a single idea in this complexity. A way to bring clarity to the mind  
is to write down your immediate thoughts and feelings in response to the events of the*

*day, and then ponder them. If you emphasize one particular problem in this writing, it will gradually lead to all others. –20<sup>th</sup> century author and teacher, J. Krishnamurti*

You'll need your pen and journal for the exercise. Sit comfortably on a chair, the sofa, or your bed. This journaling exercise is called free writing, automatic writing, or, as named by Julia Cameron in her book, *The Artists' Way*, "Morning Pages." You will write three pages—whatever comes to mind, you write it down. Simply keep your hand moving across the page and don't worry about making your words elegant, grammatical, or sensible. There is no need be no logical from sentence to sentence. Just keep going. If you can't think of anything to write, just write, "I can't think of anything to write" for three pages. Free writing has a number of purposes: It clears the head of gobbledygook; lets you know what mood you're in right now; offers solutions to problems; gives space for whining and complaining; and connects you directly to your most creative impulses. Writing three pages should take about 30-45 minutes. No one will ever read these pages. You don't ever have to read them either.

Free writing is a powerful tool—it teaches you how to listen within yourself and trust what arises. Our minds are usually speedy and busy. This exercise slows your thinking down, thought by thought. As you continue to tune in, you will be able to hear all your different voices: encouraging, shaming, wise, childish, brave, and insecure. There are dozens of voices, making dozens of "yous"; a you that grew up believing what your teachers or parents said, a you that urges you forward, protects you from pain, believes you are lovable, or jeers at you from the sidelines. Through attention, they begin

to separate out. Through your writing, you can learn how they speak (like a child, a stern aunt, or your best girlfriend) and what brings them forward in your inner dialog. In free writing, you can begin to hear the voices “talk” to each other, engaging in long-standing feuds (the part that believes you’re lovable vs. the part who jeers at you), creating escape routes (your risk-taker vs. the one who keeps you safe), and figuring out how to love (co-dependent you vs. warrior goddess you). As you get to know yourself, you will find—invariably, always, there are no exceptions—wisdom you had no idea you possessed. It comes forward when you least expect it to point you in the right direction, tell you whether or not to stay in school or take a job, help figure out if falling in love with so-and-so is a brilliant move or a confused one, teach you to distinguish what brings healing from what reinforces neurosis. Usually. Other times your writing will be one whine after another or endless to-do lists. But if you make three pages of writing a daily practice and if your inner wisdom knows you will keep the appointment, it will show up for you. The only rule is to begin the practice *without agenda*. Simply sit down, pick up your journal, and start writing. Writing longhand engages this process more than writing at the computer. It is more intimate and relaxed and you’re forced to slow down a bit.

It takes practice to hear your best self, and you certainly can’t force it to happen, but if you are patient and respectful, it will come out. It wants to come out when the ground has been prepared properly and, somehow, disciplined practice is what it takes. Claudio Naranjo, Human Potential Movement pioneer, once said, “only repetition invites spontaneous variation.” This is a wonderful description of the fruits of discipline. It’s

only by playing the same piece over and over again that the musician learns to improvise skillfully.

Here are a few recent examples from my free-writing journal that illustrate how the practice begins. If I can embarrass myself this way, so can you.

4-25-06

*As usual, I'm kind of late getting to what is most important. I feel a little speedy—maybe in part because yesterday was such a buzz. In deep conversation with PR. Very motivating conversation with Michael. Had a short interview. A lot of talking, which made me tired. When I click on conversation with PR, I feel full and safe for some reason. Odd because the conversation was about shadowy things. But it makes me feel connected up somehow. I should make note of that idea I had after I hung up the phone yesterday. I have an endless list of boring things to do today.*

*Etc.*

4-26-06

*It's very, very cold where I'm sitting right now, on a platform waiting for the train to NYC. A very chilly April morning and I feel very nervous. Am looking forward to going shopping this afternoon. I want to look good. Have to consider how to answer Lisa's questions. I can talk about it in simple, everyday terms without being fake, superficial, or egg-heady. Tomorrow I have to co-teach that course. It's the first class. When will I have time to do the reading I'm supposed to do? I can get to it after lunch, should have a little*

*break. I have to figure out a better way to treat the things that are most important.  
Shouldn't just shoehorn them. It would be great to slow down, or to even know how.  
Etc.*

4-27-06

*Oh it is so lovely to wake up in the morning and start the day in complete quiet. It just feels so good and safe to me. So enjoyable and relaxed and there are so many possibilities. Here's my flash on their response to the articles I wrote. I think they think it's decent. But do I think it's substantial enough? Getting ready for breakfast with Rob, I hope his kids are okay. It was so fun to work with him on those music projects and I want to remember to lend him that book. Oh no I hope I'm not getting a headache, I really, really want to have a lot of energy today.  
Etc.*

I'm sure you get the idea. My writing almost always starts out in this vein. But in the ten years I've been doing this exercise, it usually (not always) happens that somewhere within these three pages, I tell myself something important—a cool idea, a smart solution, or unspoken feelings. This happens probably eighty percent of the time. In the other twenty percent, I have run the gamut from making endless to-do lists to suddenly encountering an enormous reservoir of rage, grief, or disappointment. I've also heard the voice of someone who is unbelievably petty and shockingly profound. You never know.

830-1030 AM

Breakfast, clean up, relax

I mean, really relax. If you do yoga, unfurl your mat and do some stretches or, even better, restorative poses. Read for pleasure. Go back to sleep. Let yourself slow down.

1030-1130 AM

Journaling exercise with questions: Part One

Questions are a way of focusing attention. Focusing attention in the present moment is a way to connect with genuine wisdom. Think about each question until you sense its personal meaning for you, and then begin writing. You can make your answers as short as a sentence or as long as you like. After you're done, set the answers aside. We'll come back to them again at the end of the program.

1. What 3 things do I love about myself?
2. What 3 things scare me about myself?
3. How can I honor my body? How do I honor my body?
4. What can't I say?
5. What can't I feel?
6. What do I want written on my tombstone?
7. Who do I need to forgive?
8. Who needs to forgive me?

9. What is unfolding in my life right now?

10. Who are my true friends?

1130 AM-12 PM

*Shamatha* Meditation: 20 minutes

Dedicate the merit.

12-3 PM lunch, clean up, relax, read.

3-330 PM

short walk

330-4 PM

*Shamatha* Meditation: 20 minutes

Dedicate the merit.

4-5 PM

Journaling exercise with questions: Part 2

11. What is unmentioned in my life?

12. What really ignites me, if I let it?

13. How do I manipulate others?

14. What are my addictions?

15. Who have I been listening to that I shouldn't?
16. Who haven't I been listening to that I should?
17. What aspirations am I not allowing myself to manifest?
18. What fears are ruling my life and how I make decisions? About love? Sex?  
Money?
19. What am I doing to preserve comfort? Get approval? Earn love?
20. What is difficult for me to receive? Offer?
21. What can't I admit about myself?

5-7 PM

Prepare dinner, eat, clean up, relax

7 PM

short walk

730 PM

Shamatha: 20 minutes

Dedicate the merit.

Asleep by 10 or 11 PM

## *Day Three*

### *The Day of Intention*

“A good intention clothes itself with sudden power.” Ralph Waldo Emerson

Today marks a transition. As you go through the activities of the morning, let the solo part of your retreat go. Don't try to hold on to it or run away from it too quickly. Use the writing exercises to remind yourself of your motivations, wishes, and aspirations in bringing meditation practice home.

The final meditation session before you go home (or back to your everyday schedule) includes *Maitri* or Loving-kindness meditation. This is to help make sure to include others in your efforts.

7 AM Wake up

730 AM

Shamatha- Meditation: 30 minutes

Dedicate the merit.

Note that this session is a little bit longer.

8-9 AM

Free writing, using this prompt: What I need to tell myself today is...

Just for today, use this prompt to get yourself started writing. Write whatever pops to mind. For some reason, it's helpful to write quickly, perhaps because it helps to bypass your inner critic.

9-10 AM

Breakfast, clean up

10-11 AM

This morning, make *Maitri* (loving-kindness) meditation your practice. Begin and end with 10 minutes of Shamatha. After you've sat for about ten minutes, begin your *Maitri* practice. A refresher of the instructions can be found below. When your *Maitri* practice is over, resume Shamatha for ten minutes or as long as you like.

BOXED TEXT

*Maitri* Instruction

Remember, in this practice you touch in with your own natural tenderness and begin extending it out in wider and wider circles, first to a friend, then a stranger, an enemy, and finally, to all beings. This practice can be done seated in formal meditation practice or sitting in an easy chair or lying down in bed. Eyes can be open or closed.

You begin with yourself. In turn, you bring each person's face to mind, beginning with your own. See yourself in your mind's eye and think for a moment about how hard you work to create happiness for yourself and others, make a living, express yourself, accomplish something in this life. You make so much effort. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, but somehow you keep trying. With these thoughts in mind, allow yourself to wish for your own happiness. Say to yourself, silently:

May I be happy.

May I be healthy.

May be peaceful.

May I live with ease.

Phrases like these are used in traditional Maitri meditation practice. If these words don't feel quite right to you, you can substitute other words.

Let your awareness of your self and your own efforts to be happy fade. Bring someone you love to mind, someone who, when you think of them, causes your heart to soften. It could be a parent, partner, child, or dear friend. If you can't think of anyone who makes you feel this way, you could think of a pet or of a character in a book or movie who has moved you. Think about how hard this person has tried to create happiness, how they have struggled and worked. Then send them the loving-kindness phrases:

May you be happy.

May you be healthy.

May you be peaceful.

May you live with ease.

Next, bring to mind a friend. It doesn't have to be your very best friend, although it could be. This should be a person who has been kind, helpful, or let you lean on them. Think about their efforts to be happy and send the phrases to them.

After this, call a stranger's face to mind and wish them well, too. It's totally possible to wish someone well who you don't even know.

Now think of an enemy—someone who has wronged you. Let your enemy's face come to mind. Know that this person too is just trying to be happy, no matter how strange their attempts may look to you. Send them the phrases and try to really mean it.

In the last stage of the practice, let any particular person go. Realize that everyone in the world has friends and enemies, people they love, and those they are indifferent to. Each of these people, every single one, is trying to find happiness. All creatures are. Take a few minutes and wish that all beings could be happy.

Let the practice go, and relax for a few moments before getting up.

END BOXED TEXT

11-1130 AM

short walk

1130 AM-1230 PM

After your walk, return to your retreat space and get out your journal or a piece of paper and write a letter to yourself. In your letter you will describe how you're feeling and what you may have learned about yourself or noticed about your life. Review any feelings, discoveries, delights, and irritations that come up during this time of solitude. Go over the lists of questions you answered and circle the five most important questions, the ones you don't want to forget. Make note of any ideas or emotions you'd like to explore further. You could voice your wishes about your life, remind yourself of all the things you're doing that you're proud of, or express yourself about anyone or anything you like. You could encourage yourself to be strong and brave in whatever areas you think you need such encouragement. The letter could be one sentence or twenty pages long.

Now turn to the requests you created during the first journaling exercise. ("Please show me... etc). Do they strike you any differently? Would you like to change any of the wording? Add additional requests? Once you feel satisfied with your sentences, tear this piece of paper out of your journal or write all the sentences on a new piece of paper. Put your request with the letter you wrote to yourself in a self-addressed, stamped envelope, find a mailbox and send it to yourself before you return to your regular life.

At this point your 36-hour solitary retreat is over. I salute you! It takes a lot of planning to pull something like this off, not to mention courage. If you've never done anything like this, the idea of spending 36 hours alone can be frightening. It's daunting for anyone to devote themselves to a period of intensive introspection. I'm so glad you were willing to take this chance. Congratulations!

As you pack up your space to leave (or transition it back to its original purpose), go slowly. If you begin to feel emotionally unsteady, this is very natural. (But if not, it doesn't mean you've missed the impact of the retreat!) Being in a protected, quiet space can provide relief from the hassles and problems you face in daily life. Going back to your normal routine can feel like a loss. Just as common, retreat participants may feel sad because they think they'll never be able to re-establish this contemplative atmosphere at home. If you're feeling sad or worried, there are a few things you can do. Most important, remind yourself that you can trust this process and the practices you've learned. They've been around for thousands of years and millions of people have had their lives transformed. If you stick with it, meditation will transform yours. And give yourself permission to be gentle with yourself. Try not to zoom back up to normal speed right away. If possible, give yourself the opportunity to ramp back up to your normal responsibilities slowly. Most important, when you get home (or restore your home to its normal state), sit down on a chair, your bed, or meditation cushion and meditate. It doesn't matter if you practice for five minutes or thirty minutes, making the effort to immediately establish your meditation practice at home base is a powerful gesture. So

don't unpack, don't check messages, and don't start making grocery lists. Sit in Shamatha meditation for a few minutes first and then resume your ordinary routine as you like.

Before bed at home

15 minutes of journaling to recap how it was to make the transition back home.

Shamatha meditation: 20 minutes

*Day Four*

*The Day of Change*

“I am always doing that which I cannot do, in order that I may learn how to do it.” Pablo

Picasso

The first day after your solo retreat is for focusing on bringing what you've learned home and beginning to integrate meditation and contemplation into your daily life. Take it slow. Don't be discouraged if you don't feel transformed or if bringing meditation into your life is more difficult than you thought. Remember who you are and what prompted you to begin this program in the first place. Remember what you discovered on your solo retreat and how important those discoveries are to you.

7-730 AM (or tweak slightly if needed for your schedule)

Shamatha meditation: 20 minutes

730-815 free writing

Today's Exercise:

Contemplate a Precept

In Buddhism, the Five Precepts represent the five first commitments you make to the spiritual path. These are vows not to kill, steal, lie, engage in inappropriate sexual conduct, drink alcohol or take drugs. Without adhering to the precepts, it's said, it is pretty much impossible to progress along the path. I'm not suggesting you commit to the precepts, only to examine their presence in your life.

The precepts sound pretty straightforward, but when you start to focus on them, they become a bit more complicated. Take lying, for example. You may think of yourself as a fairly straightforward person. I do. Nonetheless, when I started paying attention I found that I was lying all the time. I would refer to something that happened "last year," when it really happened five years ago. Or I would tell my husband "I'll be right home," when I *knew* I was going to spend another hour at the office, but I thought telling him would upset him and I didn't want to get into it. These untruths aren't the worst things in the world, but they create a kind of grey film on everyday interactions. Most of the time, I tell these little lies are told because I'm too lazy to think for the extra second about how to be precise or how to respect others by telling them the truth despite what I think their reaction might be. These types of lies are sneaky. When you start paying attention to how you may obscure the truth, you can begin to hold yourself to a higher standard of mindfulness and greater effort.

The precept don't kill has its own set of complications. I'm sure you're not running around stabbing people or taking aim at pigeons, but if you bring your attention to this precept throughout the day, you might find small infringements on this precept. Every spring, ants mount an initiative to occupy the bottom floor of our house and every spring I fight with myself about killing them. This kind of killing counts as a trespass against the precept, but at some point I allow myself to get careless about stepping over or around them because I'm just so sick of having ants in the house. You may eat at a restaurant that serves shellfish which was probably still alive right before it was on your plate. Of course, we destroy things all the time in ways we have no idea about—we step on bugs we haven't seen, our cars emit fumes that kill trees, or kill birds. We can't possibly watch out for all these precepts violations. But bringing your awareness to the way life and death are continually cycling in and out of very mundane circumstances brings a heightened sense of the preciousness of life. Stopping to think about extending respect to all living creatures can make us more respectful of our own lives as well.

The other precepts operate with similar subtlety: When you borrow some file folders from a colleague without telling her, is that stealing? If you keep continue to find excuses to hang around your best friend's husband because you think he's cute, is that inappropriate sexual conduct? And while if you may not drink or take drugs, what are you doing when you eat a cupcake or turn on the television to distract yourself from something upsetting?

So pick a precept and begin paying attention to how you follow it or break it throughout the day. You don't have to adhere to the precept or make any changes in your life. In fact, it's better if you don't because if you are trying to change, your mind won't be open to taking in your own experience.

6-630 PM

Shamatha meditation: 20 minutes

Before bed

Journal about the precept you chose. What and where did you notice its themes? Did you notice it affecting your thoughts or actions? If you had taken the precept formally, would you have broken it today? Where?

*Day Five*

*The Day of Heart Opening*

“My religion is very simple. My religion is kindness.” The Dalai Lama

When the body slows down and the mind turns inward, the heart naturally and gracefully expands. Tenderness and care for others become a joy for the self. Today is devoted to touching in with this truth.

7-730

Shamatha Meditation: 30 minutes

Start a little earlier and increase your practice by 10 minutes.

730-815

Free writing.

Today's Exercise:

Contemplate one of the *paramitas*, or the six actions that support fearlessness. Refer to page TK to refresh your memory of the meaning of generosity, discipline, patience, exertion, mindfulness, and wisdom. As you did with the precepts, choose one, say generosity, and notice where it appears or is lacking as you move through your day. If you chose generosity, notice who arouses your generosity easily, and with whom it becomes difficult. Notice the generous or ungenerous gestures of friends, colleagues, even strangers or people on TV.

6-630

*Maitri* meditation

For this evening's meditation, please practice *Maitri* (loving-kindness) meditation. Begin and end for two or three minutes of Shamatha.

Remember, in *Maitri* meditation you touch in with your own natural tenderness and begin extending it out in wider and wider circles, first to a friend, then a stranger, an enemy, and finally, to all beings. This practice can be done seated in formal meditation practice or sitting in an easy chair or lying down in bed. Eyes can be open or closed.

*Maitri* begins with yourself. Then, in turn, you bring each person's face to mind, beginning with your own. See yourself in your mind's eye and think for a moment about how hard you work to create happiness for yourself and others, make a living, express yourself, accomplish something in this life. You make so much effort. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, but somehow you keep trying. With these thoughts in mind, allow yourself to wish for your own happiness. Say to yourself, silently:

May I be happy.

May I be healthy.

May be peaceful.

May I live with ease.

Phrases like these are used in traditional *Maitri* meditation practice. If these words don't feel quite right to you, you can substitute other words.

Let your awareness of your self and your own efforts to be happy fade. Bring someone you love to mind, someone who, when you think of them, causes your heart to soften. It could be a parent, partner, child, or dear friend. If you can't think of anyone who makes you feel this way, you could think of a pet or of a character in a book or movie who has moved you. Think about how hard this person has tried to create happiness, how they have struggled and worked. Then send them the loving-kindness phrases:

May you be happy.

May you be healthy.

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May you live with ease.

Next, bring to mind a friend. It doesn't have to be your very best friend, although it could be. This should be a person who has been kind, helpful, or let you lean on them. Think about their efforts to be happy and send the phrases to them.

After this, call a stranger's face to mind and wish them well, too. It's totally possible to wish someone well who you don't even know.

Now think of an enemy—someone who has wronged you. Let your enemy's face come to mind. Know that this person too is just trying to be happy, no matter how strange their attempts may look to you. Send them the phrases and try to really mean it.

In the last stage of the practice, drop your focus on any person or people in particular. Realize that everyone in the world has friends and enemies, people they love, and those they are indifferent to. Each of these people, every single one, is trying to find happiness. All creatures are. Take a few minutes and wish that all beings could be happy.

Let the practice go, and relax for a few moments before getting up.

One of the great things about Maitri is that you can flash on it and extend it anytime—walking down the street, you could extend it to a stranger. You could offer Maitri to a friend who is upset, on the spot. You could offer it to yourself before an important meeting or a scary doctor’s visit.

Before bed

Journal about any observations about how the *paramita* you chose appeared (or didn’t) in your day.

*Day Six*

*The Day of Friendship*

“A friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of nature.” Ralph Waldo Emerson

Today your focus is going to be on appreciation for those who have shown you kindness. Remember back on Day Two when you wrote in your journal about friendship? One of the questions was, “who are my true friends?” You may have listed a dozen names, or none, or maybe just your pet. It doesn’t matter. Today you’re going to consider the topic of friendship.

*Kalyanamitra* is a Sanskrit word meaning “spiritual friend.” A spiritual friend is someone that offers you a chance to deepen your spirituality. A spiritual friend can come in the form of a very generous and encouraging person who has taught you a lot. But it

can also be a person who has caused you pain and forced you to grow spiritually. For example, I consider the boyfriend who broke my heart to be a spiritual friend. I certainly didn't feel that way at the time, but now I know that this experience gave me a glimpse into the illusory nature of emotional suffering. So, if you benefited from someone by learning something, seeing things more clearly, or becoming more devoted to loving-kindness, then this person was a *kalyanamitra*.

7-730

Shamatha Meditation: 30 minutes

730-815 AM

Free writing

Today's Exercise: make a list of the people from whom you have learned the most. It may have been through a good experience or a difficult one, in the past or in the present. Chose one or two people and bring their faces to mind. You are going to write them a letter of gratitude, but before doing so, pause to give thought to the nature of their kindness. Let yourself feel what it was like to have received what they brought to you. Tell them what you learned, how you learned it, and how it helped you. Explain to them the impact this has had on your life. Offer your appreciation to them. You can choose to mail it, or not.

Go about your day as usual.

630P

Shamatha or Maitri Meditation

Dedication of Merit

*Day Seven*

*The Day of Commitment*

“If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading.” Lao Tzu

7-730 AM

Shamatha Meditation: 30 minutes

730-815 AM

Free writing.

Today’s Exercise:

In addition to free writing, find some time to journal about what has occurred in the last seven days. What were your expectations before you began? How have they been confirmed or altered? Think back to your 36-hours of solitude. What was that experience like? What has it been like to meditate every day? Has it been difficult to make the time? Easy? How has it felt to consciously bring spirituality to your everyday life? What have you learned about yourself or those who are important to you? What are your intentions regarding your spiritual practice going forward?

Go about your day as usual.

6-630 PM

Shamatha or Maitri Meditation

630-7 PM

To close your 7-day at-home retreat, take a few moments to make an offering of gratitude. You could offer gratitude to those who made it possible for you to do this program; to your family or friends who supported you emotionally or by taking some of your responsibilities off your hands. You could give thanks by writing them a note or a gift, or simply by thinking good thoughts of them and wishing them well.

You could offer gratitude to yourself for putting this in effort. A program such as this demands a lot of focus. You may have confronted difficult and painful feelings; you may have taught yourself how to let go, enjoy stillness. It takes courage to embark on a journey such as this. Thank yourself for making this happen.

You could offer gratitude to the wisdom that animates all existence. God, Self, Being: give thanks for seen and unseen support that surrounds you.

Dedication of Merit