

Four Voices of Contemplative Discernment Week One: Intro & Practices

Kate: Welcome, everyone, to week one.

I'm Kate Sheehan Roach, and we're so excited to get started with the four voices of contemplative discernment with Cynthia Bourgeau.

This week is really an introduction with a bit of an overview, and then Cynthia will take us into the teaching on the first voice, which is the nafs, a really great place to begin.

And we'll also get started with some of the practices that will be part of the entire course.

We'll get started with basic meditation and walking meditation.

So thanks, Cynthia, for getting us off on the right foot, no pun intended.

Cynthia: Great.

Thank you, Kate.

Well, of course, you're probably wondering what that word is that Kate just said, the nafs.

That's the word we have in Sufism for the lower passionate soul.

It's the voice that's sort of closest to our psyche, to our unconscious, to what the Western tradition would call the false self.

But I'm going to talk a little bit when we do the actual talk about why that probably is not fair to the nafs.

I want to give it a much more value-free and positive spin.

So we're going to be working with that.

It's your lower side.

It's your sort of most obvious and in-your-face voice when you make your decisions, when you bring this to the table.

So that's where we're going to be this week.

We're going to start immediately with the process of meditation because as I said in the introduction, the course is cumulative.

And meditation is certainly cumulative.

It's the go-to practice for the whole course and for anybody really trying to work with a contemplative discernment measurement or to engage the larger self I talked about in the introduction.

Without a good meditation practice stable under your belt, it's almost a hundred percent guaranteed that you're going to make your decisions from too small a part of you.

Meditation allows you spaciousness so the other voices, the more subtle voices, can come into play.

And it also gives you some relief from anxiety because when you have voices talking which are driven by fear or urgency or self-importance, they're going to run you right into a brick wall.

So meditation has been regarded in virtually all the spiritual traditions as a place to begin to open some space for something deeper to happen to you, something non-mechanical, something surprising and more spacious.

So there are many introductory meditation practices.

I'm sure some of you on this course will have some.

My own practice over the years has been centering prayer.

There are also many, many very popular practices.

In the Christian tradition there is Christian meditation as taught by the John Main Society.

Through the great Buddhist traditions there is Vipassana, the watching of thought.

There are classic practices for following breath, counting breath, using mantra.

In other words, there are many, many meditation practices.

And what I want to share with you now is basically a simple generic practice.

It's close to centering prayer but it's not identical to it.

And I would say that if you already have a meditation practice well established in you, keep the meditation practice you're working with.

If you don't or if you haven't been content quite with what's happening in your meditation practice, here is a simple kind of generic starter.

So the first thing, basically in meditation you do these very simple things that we're going to, I'll talk you through and then we're going to demonstrate.

Kate is going to be my poster girl for this.

That basically sitting comfortably in a chair or a meditation stool if you're using such things, you bring yourself into a position of being relaxed but alert.

The most alert posture that you can muster that's still consistent with your own physical condition and needs and liabilities.

So we try to do that.

The second, eyes will gently close.

And the third, we bring our attention to our breath.

Not to mess with the breath, not to try and change it in this, just to allow it to be kind of a steady metronome.

Oh, I'm breathing.

It'll ground and anchor.

Then whenever you feel as though your attention is getting stolen by a thought, simply bring your attention back to the breath.

It probably will already be pretty close to the breath anyway.

So just let it come back there again as a way of releasing that thought that's trying to steal your attention.

So meditation is basically just that.

And at the end of the time of meditation, which we're going to recommend is fifteen to twenty minutes, you gently and consciously make a transition.

Open your eyes slowly.

Get up off your chair slowly so that you're not immediately whiplashed into action.

But make a conscious transition between what you were doing in meditation and what you will be doing as you move into your day.

So that's the basic ground rules.

And so Kate, if you could take a position in your chair and we'll look at some aspects of this.

Thank you.

The first thing is posture.

And meditation practitioners vary all over the map on this one.

Some meditation practitioners and traditions are very stern about it.

Others cut you a lot more slack.

But generally, your body does assist you tremendously in meditation.

Meditation is, believe it or not, an embodied activity.

And the closer you can approximate what's good singing position, the more the air and the energy will flow smoothly through your whole body, through your chakras, if you like that language.

And not get in the way.

If you're sitting on a chair, get one that's the right height for you so that your feet comfortably touch the ground and are planted firmly on it so that you can actually sense your feet there if you need to.

If you're shorty like me and every chair is too long, you can tuck a book or a cushion underneath them.

Because maintaining that position, really no kidding, will help the energy, the currents in your body flow better.

So your body will help you in meditation and not fight you.

Now, eyes are gently closed, usually simply so it cuts visual clutter so that you're not being bombarded by quite so many thoughts.

If you find yourself getting sleepy and nodding off, you can bring your eyes to a soft focus, focusing like maybe not really tightly focusing on some sort of position like maybe two or three feet off you, sort of on the floor, and that should bring you back.

Now, just a word about head.

Try to keep it on the top of your neck like it was a little ball sitting on the top of your neck.

If you're Christian, try to avoid the two typical body misplacements.

Either you scrunch up like, "Oh God!"

or you droop down like, "I am not worthy."

Either one of those will give you a splitting headache if you do extended meditation.

Just keep the head neutral.

Try to close your eyes gently and as you close your eyes to release tension in the face.

Tension tends to hang out in our eyeballs and in our lips, believe it or not, and sometimes in our cheeks.

And if you can consciously relax these parts of you, relax the jaw, say, "Okay darlings, it's all right, close gently, we're meditating," you'll find again that your body will help you.

So that's basically the position.

Do that for 15 or 20 minutes.

Decide in advance how long you want to do it and then emerge.

Make that conscious transition.

Go about your day.

So how do you know when the 15 or 20 minutes is over?

Well, if you've got one of those neat little apps on your computer, you can have a meditation timer that calls you out of it.

But you haven't done any harm if you have a watch nearby and just look at it.

After a while you'll know and nobody's keeping score.

The idea is to do it long enough so that you actually have a chance to go through some inner wrestling and pawing around like sometimes a dog will circle three times in their dog bed before they flop.

It's like that with the mind too.

So that you actually have enough physical space to access something that lies beyond that monkey mind as the Buddhists so call it.

So that is sitting meditation.

And I would say that's Sitting Meditation 101, a classic start.

But there is also Walking Meditation or as we would say it better, AND there is also Walking Meditation.

And there are various kinds of Walking Meditation.

The place where you're going to bump into Walking Meditation most frequently is at a meditation retreat where people are doing extended long periods of sitting or else they're doing a lot of it a day, either long or many, many periods of sitting.

So meditative walking is intended to give the body, particularly the lower part of the body, a little bit of a chance to relax, to get out of what may be a cramped position, to engage in the act of contemplation, to stretch.

But the idea is not to break the flow of meditation.

So what we try to do is to do rhythmic motion, slow, rhythmic, engaged walking so that walking becomes an extension of the quiet mind of contemplation, not a disruption of it.

So basically there are two paces.

And one is more typical in the Christian world.

We'll call it the Christian meditative walking pace.

And the other is about three times slower than that, which you'll call the Buddhist meditation pace.

And they're working at slightly different aspects.

But let's demonstrate, Kate, first of all, your classic walking meditation as you would find it in a typical Centering Prayer retreat.

So people rise from their cushions and when a bell goes, they start walking.

And it's a simple, see, moving forward, allowing your attention to be in your body, just gently stepping forward, no rush, no distraction, arms falling gently at your side, and so you go.

You can walk back if you want.

And maybe you could demonstrate.

Some people like to put their hands sort of around the area of their, yep, like that, which is another really lovely way to do it.

Good.

And so you see that you've had a chance to do that.

That's also a wonderful, Kate, if you happen to be in a place where you're near a labyrinth and like to walk the labyrinth as contemplative exercise, that's a wonderful pace to adopt for that, a slow moving forward.

There's also a much slower practice that you'll find very often in Buddhist retreats, which really brings an intense presence to the flexing, the lifting, the sensation of each sacred joint of the foot and the leg as it lifts.

And it looks like this.

See how she's slowly raising a foot, feeling each conscious stretch, the foot through the air, the rebalancing, the toe to the heel down, the balls of the foot, the other one rising, these sacred actions that so many of us just take for granted, understanding the miracle of how much goes into transporting us from hither and yon.

But we're not trying to think about it.

We're just sort of reveling in the vibrancy of the sensation as if for the moment our feet, so usually neglected, are carrying the whole of our conscious sensation and presence.

Beautiful.

And so we'll ring a bell.

And very often in a Buddhist meditation when they ring the bell, the Buddhists don't walk like that anymore but they move rather swiftly back to their chair or seat.

Yeah, like that.

It's like, "All right, walking meditation is over."

So those are basic forms of meditation.

And typically, as I said, people will use sitting meditation as their primary practice, their go-to practice.

Walking meditation when you're doing an intense amount of it.

It's generally at meditation retreats.

However, there are some people, and I know there are some, that are just so kind of strung and wired that any kind of sitting meditation is difficult.

And if that's the case, you might want to start with walking meditation as your basic practice.

Start with the faster version.

See if you can get yourself calmed down enough to actually experiment with that slower and more consciously sensate version.

And finally, I just want to mention that another form of really good moving meditation, which everybody has a little bit in everybody's day, is rhythmic motion.

The kind of motion you get when you're sweeping a room, washing or stacking dishes, folding laundry, raking leaves, all these simple gestures, if you really give yourself to them in the body, can become very beautiful forms of embodied movement, which is another form of moving meditation.

So be gentle with your type, work with what's available for you, and look at all opportunities in life to enter in a larger and more spacious mind.

The bottom line for this week's teaching on practice is that meditation happens in the body, not outside the body.

And the more you honor your body and invite it to participate, the more it will lead you directly into those more subtle voices which will allow you to finally make a more subtle and more sustainable decision.

Thank you.

Kate: Thank you so much, Cynthia.

And remember everyone, we have the online forum for conversation about the practices too.

If you have questions or if you're having challenges, just type them into the forum and we'll get there.

I really appreciate this opportunity to demonstrate, particularly the walking meditation, because I think I've been actually doing it wrong for a while.

Cynthia actually showed me how to really slow it down.

And I'm reminded of a friend of mine who's a Centering Prayer practitioner who somebody said, "Well, you know, I don't have 20 minutes to do that.

So I'm just going to do it like five minutes."

And I'm like, "Okay, that's fine."

But his answer to that was very funny is that he said, "It takes me about 19 and a half minutes to settle down.

So I'm actually only meditating for 30 seconds."

So don't judge yourself if you're thinking about the cares of the day for the first part, but that is why we recommend 15 to 20 minutes because it gives our minds a chance to settle.

And then whatever richness is there in the end is this time to cultivate what I love how you describe it, Cynthia, as spaciousness.

So I think that's the theme of the week, spaciousness and grace and non-judgment and jump right in and enjoy the practices.

So thank you for having me demonstrate, Cynthia.

I think I finally got it almost right.

Okay.

Stay tuned.