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Reflections on a Silent Meditation Retreat: A Beginner's Perspective

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This paper explores the experience of a silent meditation retreat from the perspective of a novice practitioner. The 7-day Scientist Meditation Retreat was held at the Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California. It was intended to provide meditation researchers an intensive silent retreat experience. The author shares his reflections throughout the retreat and concludes with some of the personal insights he gained.

Background

Transpersonal psychologists have been deeply interested in meditation since the field's inception. They have viewed meditation as a method for deeply examining consciousness, self, and experiencing nonordinary states (Walsh, 1996). My own interest in meditation and Buddhist Psychology, in particular, has existed since graduate school. Like many with these interests, I have been what is humorously called a "bedside Buddhist." That is, my Buddhist knowledge and practice were mostly confined to keeping a stack of Buddhist texts next to my bed to read as a soporific. This has changed the past two years as my intellectual interest has moved into a desire to practice meditation on a regular basis. Now I practice sitting meditation (*zazen*) for about 30-minutes a day. My frequency has waxed and waned, but remained fairly consistent over this time. I consider myself a novice, but more than a dilettante. The reason for my increased interest is personal and professional. I desire spiritual experience, inner peace and calm, and the ability to consistently operate within the present moment. Moreover, as a researcher I study the effects of mindfulness practice in psychotherapy and as an intervention for vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue among trauma workers.

What follows is an account of my recent experience on a 7-day silent Scientist Meditation Retreat at Spirit Rock Meditation Center (SRMC) in Woodacre, California. There are numerous styles of meditation from virtually every major religious tradition (Johnson, 1982). Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, for example—their orthodox and more mystical forms—proscribe meditation and contemplative practices similar to those practiced in the Far East. This particular retreat intended to introduce researchers to mindfulness meditation and the silent

retreat experience. The retreat provided an opportunity to network with meditation researchers from a variety of disciplines (e.g., neuroscientists, psychologists, physicians) and learn of their work (after the silence was broken, of course). The renowned Richard Davidson from University of Wisconsin was slated to be the headline presenter but had to withdraw for personal reasons—though his lab was well represented at the retreat. His research is well-known for studying the effects of meditation by conducting fMRIs, with the Dalai Lama's cooperation and support, on Tibetan monks. A colleague and friend of Davidson's from UC-Davis replaced him as the featured speaker.

For those who are unfamiliar with SRMC, it is a retreat and Buddhist training center founded by Jack Kornfield and his colleagues from the Insight Meditation Society. Its teachings fall within the Theravada Buddhist tradition, but from its inception the founders valued diversity in practice, teaching, and study. SRMC's mission statement from its website reads:

The purpose of Spirit Rock is to help each individual find within himself or herself peace, compassion, and wisdom, through the practice of mindfulness and insight meditation (*vipassana*), and to support the individual in taking those qualities into the world. We see Spirit Rock as a living mandala (a circle) whose central inspiration is the dharma, the deepest truth of life, beyond words and concepts. The outer expressions of the mandala are both reflections of the dharma and paths leading back to the dharma. The outer expressions, which are interdependent and support one another, include our programs and trainings in retreats, wise relationship, study, hermitage, service, and spiritual practices, in the world. (Spirit Rock, 2009)

Context

SRMC requests that retreatants take a vow of noble silence beginning on the afternoon of the first day through the afternoon of the 6th day, at which time the various researchers and health practitioners were able to introduce themselves to one another. Noble silence entails refraining from both verbal and nonverbal communication with oneself or others. This includes refraining from journaling or note writing, singing, gestures, or reading. The SRMC website outlines the goals of the retreat and practice of silence:

A retreat provides an opportunity and a caring container for undertaking intensive meditation, like an immersion course in a language. The central practice on retreats is mindfulness, which enables us to see the ways we create difficulties in our lives and to discover a freedom of heart in the midst of all things. The mindfulness practice on retreats is often accompanied and complemented by training in lovingkindness meditation...Most of the retreat is held in silence—retreatants do not speak to one another. Writing and reading are also discouraged, so that retreatants can better stay with their own present experience as it unfolds, moment to moment. In this silent and mindful environment, awareness sharpens, the body quiets, the mind clears, and space opens for insight and understanding to develop. (Spirit Rock, 2009)

In sum, the goal of the retreat was to practice the skill of mindfulness, aided by silence and the beautiful surroundings, moment-by-moment throughout the day. Retreatants were also assigned a work meditation, which was to be conducted once a day for approximately one hour. This might involve cooking, cleaning, food service, or maintenance of the grounds. I was assigned to cleaning showers in my residence hall. Silence was to be maintained, as was the practice of mindfulness while working.

The daily schedule involved alternating periods of sitting and walking meditation beginning at 6:15 am and ending around 9:30 pm—with breakfast, lunch, and an evening tea (or light supper) served. Two optional periods for yoga were also offered, as well as a dharma talk before evening tea, and an evening lecture. Finally, I must mention the glorious surroundings and facilities. Coastal hills and forest filled with wild deer and turkey surround the meditation and residence halls. The meditation hall itself is unlike any I have ever seen.

Silent Meditation Retreat

Wooden floors and ceiling and large windows enclose the meditation center. Two ornate Buddha statues adorn the front of the hall and a smaller, but exquisite, dancing Buddha is displayed in back.

Reflections

Before the retreat, I was both nervous and excited. I had never meditated longer than one day and I was not sure how the length and experience of silence would affect me. Friends commented that they would “lose their minds” or become extremely talkative after such an experience. I had no strong expectations, but curiosity gripped me. I was not sure what to expect. I know that I desired an “experience”—that is, I wanted something tangible that would indicate some type of learning or transformation. I was mostly fearful about the physical toll it would take on my body. Even with my relatively brief 30-minute daily practice, I almost always experienced intense pain in my legs including having one or both legs fall asleep. I was conscious of fearing this pain as well as self-conscious about appearing as less capable than the other meditators.

Days 1 and 2

Pain, pain, and more pain. Our instructors warned us that the first full day of meditation could be physically and psychologically demanding. It was. My legs and body ached, my meditation was full of awareness that I was feeling pain and thoughts such as “move, get up...how much longer...please, bell, ring soon!” From the beginning, I found myself preoccupied with what type of meditation posture would be most comfortable, and honestly, would make me appear as an experienced practitioner rather than a beginner. Full lotus is not an option as I’m as flexible as dry bread; so I tried half-lotus, Burmese-style (i.e., legs uncrossed lying in front), Japanese-style (i.e., kneeling position), and used a number of different cushions or seats (e.g., zafu, zabuton, gomden, seiza bench). My first insight: after any lengthy period of time meditating, everything is uncomfortable. I did find that the Japanese-style (i.e., *seiza*, kneeling while sitting on a short bench) allowed me to sit with the least amount of discomfort. Our teachers instructed us to notice our sensations, such as pain, and our thoughts, such as aversion, and simply observe them with kind acceptance (easier said than done, I might add).

Overall, thoughts, sensations, and preoccupations bombarded my consciousness. I remember thinking that if the rest of the week continued this way, it might be a sign to find a new spiritual practice. I slept fitfully and had active, vivid dreams about being at a silent retreat.

Day 3

Some meditation practices are known for their austerity—strict regimens of sitting perfectly still for long hours, eating very little, and perpetually focusing attention on a single object. The teachers at Spirit Rock promoted a kinder, gentler approach. They encouraged retreatants to follow the instruction and schedule as much as they were able, but to also follow their hearts and practice loving-kindness toward themselves. They stressed that retreatants would likely change in some way, even if they followed none of the instructions other than noble silence for the entire week. I expect that this is true. Lives in America tend to be lived at a rapid, noise-filled pace. Everyone would likely benefit from wrapping oneself in silence and California's pleasant weather and resplendent surroundings.

Thus, I spent time after breakfast mindfully hiking in the hills and woods of the retreat center. I found that a strenuous 45-minute hike through the hills led to majestic views. I could see the San Francisco Bay and Golden Gate bridge from the top of the hills. On the morning of the second day, I simultaneously watched the sun rise in the East and the full moon set in the West. After just two days of meditating, I noticed my awareness and concentration sharpening. The day seemed brighter, the air crisper, and the food tastier. I was not sure if this was the result of the meditation or simply the "vacation effect" that many experience upon leaving their ordinary routines behind. Once again, I fell asleep exhausted. I had the following dreams:

In the first dream, I am walking on a dock with one of the meditation teachers at the retreat (one who is ill and had to leave the retreat). The dock is old and has many holes and weak spots. Twice I catch her from falling into the water. She is grateful.

In the second dream, I am a new member of an elite assault force. I am handed weapons and engage in battle. I shoot and kill several people. I think to myself that my target practice has paid off. After the battle, my fellow soldiers participate in recreation and merriment accompanied by women I believe to be prostitutes. I walk around the scene, not fully participating, looking for something...

Day 4

By this point, I noticed my meditation and my mind becoming more still and quiet though a parade of thoughts and sensations march on. I notice the absence of bliss or euphoria as well. I experienced mostly a calm, at ease, neutral state. I have learned from my study that

bliss, while pleasurable, should not be the ultimate goal of meditation. It is something to be experienced, savored, but let go like all passing phenomena. Thus, I was not disappointed, but felt a curious expectancy as to what types of pleasurable nonordinary states I might experience, if any.

On the other hand, I felt challenged by my work meditation. The work frustrated me, as I could not get the showers as clean as I would like. Furthermore, it took me longer than the designated hour and I missed sitting meditation time. I felt rushed and not mindful or calm at all. I worried what the staff would think. Will they think I am slacking off or incompetent? I recognized that working meditation would be a good practice for me. I found the sitting and walking meditations to be centering and calming. The pain from the first day had greatly decreased. Other than noticing passing thoughts and senses, I found the meditation times a refuge. I eagerly awaited them. The work meditation, in contrast, permitted me to experience more of what practicing mindfulness in everyday life is like. I encountered expectations, self-consciousness, frustration, and tasks that require patience and diligence. Remaining mindful and practicing lovingkindness during these times stretched my skills and my patience.

Day 5

Today I experienced bliss. I mentioned earlier that my experience to this point had been calming, centering, and deepening. I had not noticed any grand transformations, but rather subtle changes in my mind and being. Indeed, I had not realized how the retreat was affecting me until I attempted to speak with my meditation teacher during our allotted time together. Up to this point, I had not spoken to anyone. When I tried to speak, it felt as if all manner of voice had left me. I could not find the words. It took great effort to bring myself to speak. I had no pressing concerns or questions. My practice seemed to be going along nicely. So I said, "No questions, but I haven't experienced any bliss yet?" My teacher smiled and responded, "Would you like to experience bliss?" I nodded. He proceeded to give me the following instructions:

Release your concentration of breath and let your awareness fill this room. Now gradually allow your awareness to move outside of this room. Notice the wind, notice that bird chirping. Let go of your attention to your breath and your body and let your awareness expand outside to the surroundings and on.

I followed his directions and felt my sense of self expand. I was amazed. I experienced a floating sensation. It felt like my body was dissolving and floating off into the air. I felt intense joy and freedom. I also became aware of the impulse to climb the hills and take in the view under this trance-like state. It felt like a drug-induced trip, but with no side effects. As I started to climb I became more and more aware of my body. It was a steep climb and I was beginning to feel fatigued. The blissful state began to wax and wane. I felt no sorrow about this; instead, I felt grateful for the experience. I enjoyed it, but felt no attachment to it; I had no desire for more. Happily, I returned to my regular practice of sitting, walking, and mindfully meditating. I remember thinking that if bliss comes, then wonderful, I'll let it arise and pass. If it does not come, then so be it.

I carried remnants of this bliss into the evening lecture and meditation, which focused on death. I left the meditation hall that night feeling sober and reflective. During this death meditation, I experienced a release of the concerns regarding personal and professional accomplishments. Instead, I felt a deep desire to love and share love with others; I had the sense that this was all that mattered. I thought of my loved ones and I reflected on my death. I saw myself in death lying upon a table. I thought of never holding, touching, or laughing again. Love and laughter—these were the highest ideals, I thought to myself. All other things paled in comparison.

Day 6

Each day, for the most part, I experienced my meditation deepening—that is, I found it easier to relax into breathing and mindfulness. I became aware that the retreat was almost complete. I sensed sadness about this. I had thoroughly enjoyed the experience. At this point, everything seemed alive and amplified. Walks in the woods seemed surreal. Visual and hearing acuity seemed enhanced. At times during the week, my jocularity overcame me. I played practical jokes on my roommate such as moving his shoes from where he left them outside the residence and meditation halls and writing comical notes for the meditation teachers. These mirthful moments brightened already sunny California days.

I never realized how much work intense meditation could be. I felt quite fatigued at the end of each day. While experiencing deep peace, I also found that something about the practice of intense

concentration and mindfulness requires great effort. Moreover, I strained my upper back in the night and now had more physical pain to contend with. I resolved to make it a part of my meditation—noting the pain, returning to the breath—and for the most part I was successful at it.

The peace and calm of previous days began to elude me. Thoughts and feelings of conceit, self-consciousness, and judgment surfaced frequently. The evening lecture seemed to trigger these critical thoughts. Something about the presentation on the current neuroscience of meditation irritated me—not sure if it was the delivery or the message. I struggled to apply nonjudgment and lovingkindness towards myself. I escaped the meditation hall and company of others. I conducted the evening meditation in solitude on a deck underneath the moon and the stars caressed by the cool evening breeze. I sat with my anger, irritation, and frustration waiting for insight that never came. On reflection, I believe I felt intimidated by this area of research. That is, I felt somehow minimized as an applied and clinical researcher. I also believe that something about quantifying and reducing meditation into its biochemical processes felt threatening to my romantic ideas about this spiritual practice.

Day 7

We broke silence in the afternoon to introduce ourselves to the other retreatants and begin debriefing the experience. We continued silence during meals and meditation sessions. I was overcome by emotion as I tried to speak during a small group debriefing. My eyes welled up with tears, I felt emotionally raw. I was amazed by the power of words and silence. I vacillated between feeling grounded and shocked—between a meditative, trance-like state and a vulnerable, fragile one. It was clear that I was coming off of an intense experience, that I had been deeply affected. I fluctuated between desiring solitude and contact with other retreatants. In one case, I was sitting with a group of meditators in the dining hall discussing the science of meditation. The words and language began to reach an unbearable volume and I retreated to find quiet and solitude. I felt viscerally bombarded by noise and overstimulation.

The retreat had come to an end. I felt camaraderie with the other meditators. Though we had not spoken to each other for an entire week, I felt strongly connected to many of them. Their faces brought me comfort or stimulated inner reflection and

insight during the week. We shared a common goal—experiencing inner calm, peace, and insight into the workings of our minds and the creation of suffering. I will miss my meditation cushion and spot in the meditation hall. I will miss the grandeur and loveliness of the hills, trees, wildlife, and fellow meditators.

Conclusions

The silent vipassana retreat at SRMC was truly unlike anything I have experienced before. Overall, I found the experience healing, self-expanding, calming, rejuvenating, and deeply transpersonal. I experienced stillness, quiet, and self-observation at levels never before encountered. One of the translations of *vipassana* is “insight.” Throughout my meditation, I had meaningful insights about myself and the processes of my consciousness at varying degrees of depth and significance. Upon reading these, they may not seem profound. They may even seem trite and cliché. However, words do not do justice to the experiential level of understanding I gained—how I encountered these insights on a felt-sense level, rather than purely at an intellectual one.

First, I left the retreat with a strong desire to simplify my life—that is, reduce material possessions, television and computer time, and other distractions. On retreat I found happiness in the simplicity of the practice and surroundings. I had none of the comforts of modern life, but found great joy in this simplicity. Second, I believe myself to have a healthy sexual life and sexual drive. Yet on retreat, I experienced very few sexual thoughts or fantasies even when I intentionally tried to create them. Meditators find sexuality to be a common hindrance or distraction and I expect it will be for me at some point in my practice. Yet, I was surprised to find how my sexual energy seemed to be satisfied by the fullness of the meditation and retreat experience. Finally, I discovered how to celebrate my own gifts and talents without conceit—something I have struggled with for some time. The answer I found during meditation: to genuinely recognize and exalt the gifts and talents of others and to generously give praise and acknowledgement where it is due.

In conclusion, I greatly valued the experience and plan to attend 7 to 10-day retreats each year. This experience has solidified my interest in meditation and Buddhist psychology, provided valuable meditation instruction, and expanded my understanding of the depth and intensity of meditative experience as a transpersonal practice.

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