

the activist's ally

contemplative tools for social change

a production of
The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society
www.contemplativemind.org

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Contents

Part I: An Introduction to Contemplative Practice

1	What Are Contemplative Practices?.....	1
2	Compassionate Justice: Contemplative Skills.....	5
	and the Social Justice Movement	
3	Starting and Sustaining a Contemplative Practice.....	11
	The Tree of Practices.....	12
	Creating Practices from Your Ancestral Traditions.....	14
	Choosing an Existing Practice.....	16
	Sustaining Your Practice.....	39
4	Shifting Perspectives.....	43
	Dealing with Anger.....	45

Part II: Contemplative Groups and Organizations

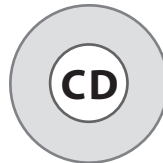
5	Creating Contemplative Groups and Organizations.....	49
	Meetings.....	52
	Conference Calls.....	59
	Facilitation.....	61
	Conflict Resolution.....	71
	Staff Retreats.....	76
	Table of Inspiration.....	89
	Outcomes.....	94
6	Bravehearts.....	97
7	Resources.....	105

The Companion CD

At the back of this book you will find a CD of practice instructions, stories and music. We would like to thank all the wonderful beings who have contributed to this compilation.



Look for this symbol throughout the book:



It appears next to topics that are supplemented by content on the CD.

Companion CD Track Listing

1. *Welcome to the Path*
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Companion CD Original, 2006
2. *Kaira Silo/The Hand of Love*
Sule Greg Wilson
The Drummers' Path
Destiny Recordings, 1994
3. *Basic Meditation/Counting the Way*
Ian Koebner
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7. *Introduction to Kirtan*
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(Kirtan from *Sita Ram* by Jai Uttal)
8. *Sita Ram*
Jai Uttal
Kirtan! The art and practice of ecstatic chant
Sounds True, 2004
9. *Like This*
Coleman Barks
I Want Burning: The Ecstatic World of Rumi,
Hafiz, and Lallah
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13. *Del MeeravadZe Dastam (My Heart is
Slipping from My Grasp)*
Dashtan Ensemble
Sounds True, 2000



Welcome

The Activist's Ally is a resource manual for social justice activists seeking to bring contemplative practices into their lives, communities and workplaces. This manual is designed to assist you down the road of personal transformation with a dual focus on individual and group practice. As you read through each chapter, reflect on your own state to see how you personally connect with the material. Then, see how the information can affect your immediate community. The work begins with you.

We have to develop some form of sustaining practice if we intend to stay in the fight for justice over the long haul. At the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, we've learned that burnout is a growing trend in the social justice community and one of the most difficult challenges we confront. We believe that the best way to sustain ourselves while working for change is with the help of contemplative practices: activities that, when incorporated into our daily life, bring us strength, peace, and inspiration. We hope that this manual will serve as an introduction to contemplative social justice work, a companion to steady the ship during rough travels.

The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society's goal is to bring contemplative practice to people who are working to improve our world. This manual grew from ten years of the Center's work with various organizations that have worked for social justice on issues including civil rights, equal rights, environmental justice, economic justice, welfare and poverty, education and the arts, health care including AIDS/HIV, labor, criminal justice, free speech and media reform, immigration, and housing and homelessness. Many of us have suffered burnout, and even when we are part of a contemplative workplace and individually nurture our paths of practice, we are still susceptible to being overworked and pushing too hard. However, our individual and organizational systems and practices help us to foster a greater awareness of when burnout is taking place and thus slow down, reflect, and pursue self-care. We understand and have fought this struggle, and it is our mission to pass on the tools that have been most beneficial during our campaigns. These are the gifts that we want to share with you.

What is the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society?

The Center began in 1993 when a group of people with experience in contemplative practice and an interest in social change came together to explore how contemplative practice could support work for social transformation. In 1997, the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society was incorporated as a non-profit organization with a mission to integrate contemplative awareness into contemporary life in order to help create a more just, compassionate, and reflective society.

Because the Center wanted to make contemplative practices available in ways other than traditional monastic forms, we began by offering programs of practice and discussion to people who shared a common profession or interest. We created pilot projects in philanthropy, business, law, environment, journalism, higher education, and social justice activism to engage people in both the personal and professional concerns of their lives. Currently, our most active programs are in the social justice, higher education, and law sectors. We hold retreats and workshops, create publications, identify useful resources, and connect like-minded individuals and organizations to help promote a stronger network of people working to improve our society with the help of contemplative practices.

Staff Retreats

A staff retreat day scheduled into the regular work life of an organization can be a source of great unity and inspiration. As we learn to be with each other in different ways we develop deeper understandings of who we are as individuals and as a group. Spending time with coworkers in a way that is fun, relaxed, and reflective can be nourishing as well as productive. Rarely in this culture do we take the time to simply pause from the frantic pace of our actions. A commitment to pausing on an organizational level can lead to an entirely different and powerful orientation toward work, vision, community, and self.

Even creating pause for a short time within a regular workday can help to create a healthy pace for our work lives. And the commitment to taking an entire day for contemplation and rejuvenation can make those changes more profound, especially if repeated at regular intervals throughout the year. It may require a leap of faith to take a precious eight hours out of the month (or even the year), but that commitment signifies an understanding of the importance of the dynamic relationship between process and product and a willingness to invest in the long-term sustainability of your workplace.

At the Center we have a staff retreat every month. You may want to start with four retreat days per year, one for each season, in order to develop a pace that is comfortable and regular and does not interfere too greatly with your schedule. The seasons also provide thematic variation, helping to ensure that the staff retreat does not become stale. Holidays from various traditions often coincide with seasonal changes and can be used for inspiration and content.

We encourage you to try some of the activities we suggest here, as well as to experiment with new ideas. Come up with a design that incorporates contributions from all members of staff, in order to best recognize and support the gifts that everyone brings to the group.

There are three general elements at the heart of our retreat days at the Center:

- sharing time in practices and in silence
- engaging in meaningful conversation
- having fun.

Typically, all of these elements are taken up with the spirit of “practice” – with the deliberate intention of maintaining a deep engagement and a sacred presence in the activities. We encourage respect for the activity and those who designed it, care and consideration for our fellow coworkers, an interest in deepening our own wisdom and compassion, and a desire to manifest the full potential of the larger group.

Since we are in a different environment from our regular work, we take special care that everyone feels secure. These kinds of contemplative spaces are uncommon in our hectic world, so sharing silence with a group of people, for example, can be challenging and uncomfortable for some at first. The challenge is to negotiate a balance between creating a space that feels comfortable and pushing the edges of what is possible. Incorporating everyone’s ideas and interests into the staff retreat days is one way to assure that everyone feels ownership of the space.

Design of the Day

When designing a staff retreat day, it is important to pay attention to balance and flow throughout the day. No agenda is ever perfect, but we can try to create a structure that supports people in their natural tendencies and needs. If we say that there will be time for silence and time for speech, time for stillness and time for movement, time for reflection and time for production, we begin to see balance in the day. We like to begin our days with some kind of movement exercise, like Yoga or Qi Gong, which is a good way to enliven people, get the group energy moving, and settle people into the day.

Sleepiness tends to make the early afternoon a difficult period. Sometimes it is helpful to give people a little extra time to rest after lunch, followed by movement or an activity that is energetic and inspiring. After periods of intense discussion, it can be nice to have a break or at least time to spend in personal unstructured reflection. Just be careful to not let people wander too far off in their bodies or minds because it can be hard to bring them back into the fold of the group.

In general, it is good to end the day with a circle of sharing or another ritual or cohesive activity that allows everyone to hear everyone else and gives them the opportunity to express their gratitude and appreciation for the day and each other.

We have found that it has been very beneficial to use an off-site space for our retreat days. Getting out of our office where work can beckon moves us into a more contemplative mode. On the other hand, when we have not been able to go off-site, a few decorative elements and shifts in the space have helped us turn our work space into a new environment, lending itself to deeper reflection.

Example of a Center retreat day

- 10 am arrival
- 10:15 yoga with video or instructor
- 11:00 sitting meditation
- 11:30 walking meditation
- 12:00 group discussion or council
- 12:30 lunch
- 2:00 gardening, art, or other group activity
- 3:30 sitting meditation
- 4:00 closing circle

Outcomes for Contemplative Organizations

According to the Center's research on the value of contemplative practices in the workplace, there are three consequences that are likely to emerge in your organization from incorporating the techniques featured in this chapter.

1. Improved communication. Staff members develop the capacity to listen without blame or judgment. More importantly, these and similar techniques allowed for new and effective ways to deal with conflict resolution between individuals and groups.

One of the most challenging issues that community organizations have to deal with are issues of race and class, yet making significant, broad-based changes requires the participation of everyone. Building a movement, given the diverse views and perspectives and inequities of power and privilege of a group, often creates tremendous conflict. The judicious use of contemplative practices can bring more "breathing room" and create a space for more productive conversations.

2. A greater sense of team and community. One of the things you are likely to notice as you continue your practice is that petty squabbles and issues with others in your workplace tend to become less important. The possibility of bonding and increasing a sense of mutual trust can be greatly enhanced.

3. Realizing the interconnections of people and the unity of life. With new awareness developed through practice, people tend to care for each other more. Both Gandhi and King said that we must learn unconditional love even for those we don't like. For social justice workers, this means that we arrive at a place of deeper caring, which is critical in maintaining a vision of hope when the going gets rough.

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