

Lessons from a meditation retreat

TURNING TOWARD THE QUIET

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“It’s too quiet.” This was the thought that plagued me during the first two days of the five-day silent meditation retreat I completed last year. Despite my best efforts to prepare myself to unplug leading up to what had unexpectedly become my busiest time of year, I was not prepared for how difficult it would be learning to embrace silence and regain a sense of calm in what had otherwise been an overwhelming time in my life.

I initially signed up for the silent retreat as a prerequisite to a certification I was considering. Conveniently conducted via Zoom and scheduled during the holidays when my calendar was otherwise open, it seemed like a great way to challenge myself while developing my meditation skills. What I did not anticipate was how busy life and work would become in the months leading up to the retreat, or that I would begin a series of speaking engagements and family obligations two days after the retreat.

A few days before it began, the idea of being unplugged from clients, family, and friends for five days seemed impossible. It felt like I should be available: “What if someone needs me?” was a thought I could not shake. At the same time, I knew I was exhausted and needed time away to reset.

To prepare for the retreat, I set a detailed autoreply and contacted my clients to share about my retreat and how to reach me in an emergency. Since I don’t have an assistant, my husband agreed to monitor my phone daily for new voicemails. My clients were wonderful, sending several messages of support, curiosity, and enthusiasm that allowed us to deepen our relationships in a way that I hadn’t anticipated.

As the retreat began, I struggled to be away from technology apart from our Zoom sessions. I didn’t like how quiet the house was or how anxious I felt being unable to check in with anyone. I agonized about whether my plan was working, but my husband assured me each evening that I had no new voicemails (which, of course, made me feel like a cell tower must be down). It was also hard being in the quiet of my thoughts and emotions with nothing to drown out the sound of my inner critic, which was constantly saying that I should be working.

Then something changed.

One morning, my husband put on Christmas music in the kitchen so that I wouldn’t miss out on the festive feeling of my favorite season. While I appreciated the sweet gesture, I found myself going upstairs to be in the quiet of our bedroom. As I wrapped myself in a blanket and sipped my coffee, I suddenly felt a new appreciation for the quiet.

I found that the quiet allowed me the space to slow down and pay attention to what I was thinking and feeling, and to navigate challenging thoughts about work and life in a supportive rather than judgmental way. I spent time considering changes I could make to manage how overwhelmed I had been feeling. I also noticed that my body relaxed in places I didn’t realize were tense.

More than anything, the quiet had become a space where I could turn and simply breathe—without the relentless pressure to always be doing something. I embraced the silence the last few days, and after the retreat ended, my mind felt clearer. I was able to deliver my speaking engagements with ease.

Over six months later, I have found myself better able to recognize when I’m feeling overwhelmed, and I have learned to turn toward the quiet moments to re-center myself during busy days. I often take a few minutes to meditate (the Insight Timer app is my favorite) and notice how my body feels. I pay more attention to my thoughts and approach them with curiosity rather than criticism or avoidance. When I need time away, I share what I’m doing in my autoreply, which often sparks authentic discussions about well-being with clients and friends.

If you are feeling overwhelmed by life or struggling to take time for yourself, please know that you are not alone. We are all fighting our own battles, and sometimes life and work catch up with us in unexpected ways. Taking a few deep breaths, doing a quick meditation, or simply taking a break from checking email can often help to regain focus during a busy day. While I recognize that not everyone has the ability to unplug completely for five days, I encourage you to look for the quiet moments where you can simply be with yourself and take a moment to breathe one day at a time. ▲

NEED SOMEONE TO TALK TO?

One great option is Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers (LCL), which provides free, confidential support and services to Minnesota lawyers, judges, law students, and their immediate family members on any issue that causes stress or distress.

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TIPS FOR MEDITATION

- Start small. Short meditation sessions a few days a week are more valuable than one long session on the weekend.
- Find a consistent time of day to practice meditation and use an app for guidance (such as Insight Timer, Calm, Headspace).
- Try different postures to find what resonates with you (sitting in a chair, lying on the floor, resting on a cushion, etc.).
- Explore different meditation anchors (breath, body movement, sounds of your environment, etc.).
- Be patient with yourself. What you experience today may be vastly different from tomorrow, and that's okay.



TIPS FOR TAKING TIME OFF

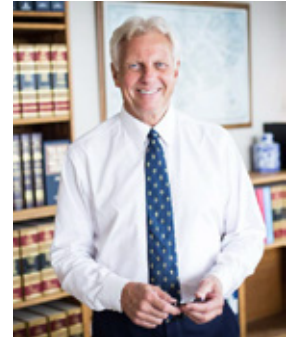
- Think about what you hope to achieve with your time away.
- Decide how "unplugged" to be (completely? available by voicemail only? checking email intermittently?).
- Arrange for back-up coverage on active files to avoid client interruptions.
- Communicate! Tell colleagues and clients what to expect and consider sharing what you're doing. It adds a personal connection that can enhance relationships.
- Be patient with yourself; taking time off can be challenging, so be kind to yourself with whatever you're able to do.

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