

Building the Contemplation Nation

The Latin root of the word “contemplation” literally means “to mark out the grounds for a temple or sacred space.” At the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, we are committed to helping people and institutions find sacredness in daily life. This can be a challenge in our culture, with its focus on producing, consuming, and speed. Here are some ideas for creating more space for reflection in your life.

At home...

Start with yourself. Find a practice that works for you. Contemplative practice can bring you well-being, stability, peace, joy, and stronger alignment with your inner wisdom and truth. Some examples of contemplative practices are sitting meditation, chanting, centering prayer, journaling, and yoga.

Free yourself from the tyranny of time. Try not wearing a watch or looking at a clock for one whole day. If you need to know what time it is, ask someone you don't know. What do you experience? Are you able to get to appointments 'on time' even without a timepiece? Is your stress level any different?

Try out the practice of Sabbath or Shabbat, adapted in a way that makes sense for you. In the Orthodox Jewish tradition, the rule is that any act involving production or creation is forbidden from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday. This includes work, shopping, spending money, energy consumption (electricity, gasoline). (Happily, sexual intimacy is actually encouraged on Shabbat!) To prepare for the day, families do all the cooking, cleaning, and shopping ahead of time. You might try stopping just one of these activities, or create your own version of the day, like a computer shabbat – don't turn the computer on for 24 hours.

Bless your food. Before diving into your meal, spend a moment reflecting on the chain of activities and events, both human and natural, which took place in order for this food to be before you. Just appreciate that.

Smile at someone who you feel wronged you.

Notice how your body feels when you experience a strong emotion. When you have an urge to do something, don't just act on your first impulse. Let the urge come a few times before you decide to act upon it.

What does it feel like to wish happiness for your enemies? If your enemies were truly happy, would they still be your enemies? Would they engage in activities that would make them your enemies?

At the end of your day, spend a few moments reflecting on the day behind you. Where did you encounter a blessing? When were you especially skillful in your actions? Unskillful?

While traveling...

If you drive, allow other drivers to merge into your lane without a struggle. Remember that other drivers may be late for something important to them, and your generosity can be a valuable gift. Consider how thankful they may be for your kindness. Imagine your small acts of generosity playing out in the lives of those who have received them, with a ripple effect.

When walking, leave 5 minutes early and savor the feeling of not being rushed. Pay special attention to the details of your surroundings: sights, smells, sounds.

If you arrive early at a destination such as a meeting or appointment, take a moment to set your intentions for your time there and think of those who will be joining you.

Walk across the street on the green “walk” sign at a leisurely pace, without rushing. Notice — do you have enough time to get across? If you were 85 years old and had difficulty walking, would it be enough time? What are the reactions of the drivers waiting for their green light?

If you drive a car, make it a practice to slow down and stop when you see a yellow light rather than speeding up to get through it. Notice the reactions of other drivers around you. Try keeping at the speed limit or under it, especially on the freeway. How many other drivers pass you? What does this feel like?

Watch the way you respond to those around you. It is easy to assume that other travelers are rushed and angry for no good reason. When someone behaves in a manner that frustrates you, try to imagine what their lives might be like; perhaps they may be experiencing some kind of hardship or difficulty which is making them more prone to anger. See what it feels like to try to be forgiving and understanding towards difficult people, instead of reacting with more anger at their actions.

At work...

If you are expecting visitors, try to greet them with an open heart, even if they bring you difficulty.

If your job involves lots of “deadlines” try calling them “lifelines” instead. Does that change the way you feel about them?

Try to create opportunities for reflection and contemplation in your place of work, school, or community. In April 2003, Brandeis University initiated the idea of an “Hour of Presence.” For one hour, the entire institution took a collective break; most administrative offices were closed and few classes were held. The organizers wrote, “We offer this as an opportunity, but also a challenge: Could you really take an hour out of your schedule and be fully *present* to yourself and others?” Can you imagine doing this at your workplace, or supporting those who do?