

Practices for Field Guide to What Really Matters:

SUFFERING

Your Life Map:

1. Spend a few moments reflecting on your life as a whole, from your birth (or even your conception) until this very moment.
2. Take a large piece of paper and use colored crayons or markers to draw a map of your Life Journey.
3. **Show the major detours your life has taken**, especially times of difficulty or challenge such as illness, death, relocation, unemployment, betrayal, loss, failure. You might draw them as ups and downs, obstacles, disruptions, tangles, or dead ends.
4. Label each major event with words or drawings so you can easily identify them in the future.
5. TIP: Use different colors or symbols to denote each of the categories on your map. Choose whatever has meaning for you that will help you interpret your map.
6. You will add to this map in the future as you complete other lessons.

Stress Mindset:

The goal is to form a partnership with stress rather than trying to eliminate it completely from your life.

Research shows that a positive attitude toward stress can actually have positive health benefits.

Remind yourself "I can meet this moment, whatever it requires" to build trust in your own resilience.

Gratitude:

Numerous scientific studies in the recent past have shown the value of practicing gratitude on a regular basis. Benefits of a gratitude practice include decreased depression, better physical health, increased satisfaction with life, better sleep, less fatigue, and less likely to suffer burnout, among others. The experience of gratitude has deep roots in the circuitry of the brain and shifts our emotions into a more positive state. A regular practice of gratitude has lasting beneficial effects on the brain. Spiritually speaking, gratitude is one of the keys to awakening to higher consciousness.

Here are some common practices that you can utilize to enhance your experience of gratitude:

1. Keep a gratitude journal

Dedicate a specific journal or notebook to your gratitude practice. Each night before you go to bed make a list of 3 things you are grateful for from this day. Research shows that reflecting on those positive aspects of your life before you go to sleep will help you relax and will improve the quality of your sleep.

2. Write “thank you” letters

Using your journal you can write a letter expressing gratitude to someone who has shown you kindness or generosity. It isn't necessary to actually send the letter but you certainly can if you feel motivated. You can also write letters to people from your past who have made a difference in your life.

3. View life as a gift

When you live from a place of humility and surrender you will recognize that all of your life is a gift and your sense of gratitude will be enhanced. Take time in your meditation to contemplate the fact that life is short and you are indeed fortunate to receive each and every day that you are here on planet Earth. Write about the gift of life in your journal.

4. Say “thank you” to others throughout the day

Notice the “little miracles” of your life each day and recognize the people who make life special. Remember to express gratitude freely and frequently every day. Note in your gratitude journal any people you remembered to thank that day.

5. Be grateful even for challenges

As we are learning on this journey through the Path of Suffering, our challenges are our greatest teachers. Use moments of stress or frustration to pause and then find one thing about the situation that you can genuinely appreciate. Hold the thought in your mind that even though there is difficulty right now I am grateful for each little moment of beauty or grace. Take time to write in your journal how your challenges have helped you grow and learn.

6. Say “Grace” before meals

A simple way to add a gratitude practice to your life is to pause for a few seconds before each meal to experience thankfulness for the food you are about to eat. This will shift your energy and emotions to a positive state before you eat which is good for your digestion and can help you eat more mindfully. Make up your own blessings or use these from the book *A Grateful Heart: Daily Blessings for the Evening Meal from Buddha to the Beatles*, edited by M.J. Ryan:

Let us give thanks for the food we are about to eat.

May there be food for all, abundant and healthful.

Let us have the wisdom to choose to eat only that which enhances our precious energy and sustains us through our labors and rest.

- adapted from *An Haggadah of Liberation*

Make a silent prayer acknowledging yourself as a vehicle of light, giving thanks for all that has come today.

- Dhyani Ywahoo

May the food we are eating make us aware of the interconnections between the universe and us, the earth and us, and all other living species and us. Because each bite contains in itself the life of the sun and the earth, may we see the meaning and value of life from these precious morsels of food.

- adapted from Thich Nhat Hahn

For more ideas check out Gratefulness.org and Greater Good Science Center

Also listen to the podcast: The Science of Happiness

Breathwork:

Breathwork is an important practice for calming the nervous system, sharpening focus, and improving mood. When you feel anxious or in pain pause for a moment, place one hand on your heart and breathe in for 6 counts and out for 8.

Observation:

As you sit in your spot notice and record what has changed since your last visit - including light, sound, wind, your own body or thoughts. When you finish stand up and move gently for 5-10 minutes: walk, dance, sway or stretch before returning to your routine.

Journaling Prompts:

1. What is causing me pain right now that I would like to address?

2. What "seeds" of change might be carried within my pain?

3. What is one thing I might be able to relax or let go of as I continue on this journey?