

Contemplative Journaling: Field Notes on the Path

As part of your Year of Ongoing Practice with the River Bird Sangha, we will ask you to keep a practice journal, and this short article is intended to provide you with some general suggestions and ways to engage with this transformative practice.

One of the final aspects to this year of practice will be to write a reflective essay on your year of practice. The journal you keep will be the archive of experience from which you will draw upon to write this final essay.

But above and beyond being “an assignment,” a journal is a powerful way to nurture self-reflection and spiritual development. Julia Cameron describes the practice of journaling as “spiritual windshield wipers,” and Ryan Holliday explains journaling as a “few minutes of reflection that both demands and creates stillness.”

Why Journal

One of the core themes in our school is that students learn, first and foremost, from their own direct experience. The “functional approach” to practice asks us to ask ourselves over and over again, “Does my *experience* align me with the *intention* of the practice?” To answer this question – in all its myriad forms – we need to attend closely to our experience, and we need to *reflect* on that experience. And we need to do this again and again over a long, extended period of time.

In the Yoga Sutra 1.14 Patanjali describes practice like this: *First, you have to practice for a long period of time; second, your practice must not be interrupted—you must do it regularly; and third, you must do your practice with love and respect.*

An ongoing practice journal – a collection of contemplative field notes from life on the path – is an outstanding vehicle for nurturing long-term commitment to practice, for supporting continuity of practice, and for deepening a sense of care and love for practice.

Journaling is an inexpensive life practice with the potential for huge benefits in terms of self-understanding, self-transformation and Self-realization.

Suggestions for How to Journal

As with all practices in this school, please take these suggestions and make them your own. Adapt them. Rewrite them. These prompts are here just to get you started, but the journey will always be uniquely your own.

- 1. Journal *AFTER* a Practice Session:** Try journaling from time to time after a practice session (after a sitting, a Yin Yoga practice, a Qi Gong practice, or after a workshop or

retreat). **Potential Prompts:** When journaling after a practice session, I try to reflect on what the themes of that session were. What was my experience of the practice like? What went well? What was challenging? What intentions for practice arose from this session? How might I integrate those intentions into my practice going forward? Or in general, what themes of life did my practice bring me to? What direction is my mind interested in exploring after this practice session?

2. **Journal BEFORE a Practice Session:** Try journaling before a practice. Fifteen to thirty minutes of stream of consciousness journaling (or what Julia Cameron calls “morning pages”) before practice can function beneficially in several potential ways. It can help process something in your life in a way that allows you to enter the practice with more presence and calm, and/or it can allow you to enter the practice with appreciation for how this theme is presently affecting you. Both are valuable. **Potential Prompts:** How am I feeling? What’s going on for me today, this week, this month? Is anything troubling me? What themes feel alive right now? What strengths do I want to support and nourish?
3. **Journal just AFTER waking up in the morning and/or journal just BEFORE going to bed:** In these journaling sessions, you might reflect more broadly on your dreams, your day, or anything else you wish to explore, including the presence of your practice in your life. **Potential Prompts:** What feels important about today? Were there personal vignettes or world events that are worth reflecting upon? What can I be grateful for? Where did I fall short of my Heart’s values? Where can I align more closely to my Heart’s intention?

Keep a notebook. Travel with it, eat with it, sleep with it. Slap into it every stray thought that flutters up into your brain. – Jack London

Digital or Analogue

You can journal in whatever fashion works best for you. The point is to do it! So if you’re more comfortable typing into a GoogleDoc or an Evernote Note, please go right ahead.

That said, we (Josh and Terry) do recommend pen and paper. A little investment in a notebook that feels worthy of your reflections as well as a favorite pen can go a long way in establishing the journaling habit. Writing by hand is associated with improved memory and learning. Daniel Oppenheimer’s research at the University of California shows that areas of the brain associated with recall and comprehension are more engaged when students write notes with a pen and paper. Writing by hand also removes the distractions of online temptations, thereby supporting more focused presence.

The other benefit of a hand-written journal is that, over time, you will have a palpable sense of continuity and commitment. As the pages build up with *your* written reflections, you can literally *feel* the continuity of practice in your hands.

Listen to and Enjoy the Journaling Process

“One practice, many forms.” The big intention of journaling is to reflect on and record your practice and life. What form your journaling takes will change and evolve along with the changes and evolutions of your practice and your being. But the idea is to allow the journaling to be an exercise of “listening to your being.” Listen to your mind, listen to your experience and listen to your heart.

We wish you all the best for this Year of Ongoing Practice in the River Bird Sangha. May your practice – and your contemplative journaling – open you to the depths of your own Heart’s wisdom and compassion.

Josh + Terry