

Ten Disciplines in Personal Responsibility

The following ten disciplines or precepts provide a foundation for meditation and a useful code of conduct for one's personal life. They can be applied at all times and under any circumstance.

Remember the breath

Negative emotion is not necessary

Externally consider

Neither accept nor reject

Do not criticise oneself or others

Speak and act only as necessary

Actively investigate

Knowledge is not information

Refine observation

Speak only from experience

One way to approach them is to take a single discipline and practice it for a week, keeping a record of what you learn from it and any questions which arise. (Please contact us with these, if you would like to). Each discipline stands on its own while also supporting the others.

Below are two perspectives on each of the disciplines, which you might find helpful.

Remember the breath

As we are born, our first breath connects us to the living world and marks our existence as a separate being, able to survive independently. Breath affects the physiology of the entire body, the functioning of every cell. It plays a major part in digestion and aids the efficient circulation of the lymph flow that removes impurities from the bodily system.

The speed and depth of breathing varies according to our physical or psychological state. Quick, shallow breathing prepares the body to react quickly, whereas slow deep breathing induces relaxation. Generally breathing is a fairly unconscious process, but its overall efficiency may be impeded by poor postural habit such as hunching the shoulders which closes the chest and inhibits air flow. The breath is an interface between the physical and the psychological. Prolonged periods of raised psychological tension or excitement may result in a pattern of fast breathing, unnecessarily stressing the body by

placing it on constant alert. Becoming conscious of our breath has the effect of making one aware of the present moment. It breaks the automatic cycle of stimulus and response and allows us to be fully present in the here and now. Breath is our connection with all life and our own vitality; we know we are alive and fully present. The breath unifies our field of attention. As a practice, remembering the breath is to do just that; remember, not alter or comment on what the breath is doing. Be aware of your breath and maintain that awareness in the knowledge that to put conscious attention on anything is to enhance it. Remembering the breath enhances one's vital self and the present moment of experience.

The breathing process encompasses the in-breath, the out-breath and the change-point between: in to out, and out to in. With the in-breath there is the taking in of data/impressions and with the out-breath we impose something from ourselves onto the world. In the sporting sphere, golfers, marksmen and the like take their winning shots on the out-breath when they have the greatest element of focus and control. Inspiration is the act of breathing in, and is also recognized as a creative moment. Life begins with the taking of a breath and ends with the cessation of breath. A conscious breath reminds us of the reality of life and death.

No forms of life subsist without breath. Can you know, without seeing, the breath of the plants, the animal kingdom, even of rock itself?

See the breath of life as it manifests in the heavens above and the earth beneath, the breath of the great waters in their ebb and flow. The greater the roar, the seeming more power; but the subtler and quieter the breath, the more power it carries. Know the infinite breaths of the heavens and the breaths of all on earth. They perpetuate life by breaking up the flows into ebb and flow, a little death separating. So death powers life and life itself depends on death.

Your breath is observable. Know that it is happening and try not to interfere with it. If you forget the breath, then you are one with the forms of life that are significant for you, and you stand governed by them.

Try too, if you can, to remember the breath of more subtle bodies.

Negative emotion is not necessary

It might be supposed that this statement could be rephrased '*positive* emotion is necessary' but this would be misleading, implying that the human mind is some sort of blank canvas that needs to be imprinted. Underlying the statement '*negative* emotion is never necessary' is the premise that the human mind has a natural capacity for joy and well being. All negative emotions such as aggression, hate, envy and unfounded fear hinder the optimum functioning of the mind.

The definition of emotion is *to be moved*. Properly used emotion should move us to act from a sense of justice or compassion; this natural emotion is simple and outward looking. Negative emotion in the sense used here is the unthinking and very personal reaction to life's irritations. As a simple example, it takes very little provocation for drivers to become aggressive in heavy, slow-moving traffic, particularly if they are in a hurry. Whether they express the anger or quietly seethe with rage, they are depleting their own precious finite store of energy. The modern philosopher Gurdjieff maintained that a few

minutes of anger or a violent outburst could use up a full day's supply of energy! Long established patterns of negative thinking need a regular input of energy. Every time we tell ourselves how badly treated we are, how unfair life is to us, we perpetuate a habit that takes energy to sustain.

It is important to recognise that negative emotions are a personal concern; they come from inside us and not from external circumstances, however trying. The problem lies with identification, viewing everything subjectively; our emotions are our problem because we create them. If you find yourself frequently blaming others, maybe you need to take a closer look at your own motivations. The behaviour of other people may annoy you but they are not responsible for the way you react. Taking responsibility for feelings is a real step towards overcoming the restrictions of negative emotion.

Responsibility for ill-feeling is not a recommendation for repression, which only stems the outward expression whilst holding on to the negativity inwardly. Negative states will arise; the skill is recognising them and avoiding attachment to them. If the negativity is indulged it soon reaches the stage where the individual feels aggrieved, outraged or compelled to re-live the annoying situation again and again. A moment before, when the feeling is first experienced, there exists more freedom of choice before the emotion gathers power; this is the time when the disquieting thought can be simply let go of. With time the attachment to negative emotional states loosens, more energy is freed and a sense of well-being becomes the natural condition.

Who has not stood giving vent to the power of negative emotion, delighting in the apparent confirmation of life in themselves? The greater the noise and rancour, the seemingly greater the affirmation of the creative. Carrying you with it, the power of the flow of life finds its own end. Often these ends are little eddies that flow inwards and downwards, not upwards and outwards. Be wary of such vortices, for if you follow them you will lose yourself in your own underworld.

So too, the gentle, seductive attraction of he who doubts his purpose, for to do so requires him to undermine the very foundation of life. Instead, affirm yourself, your purpose, with a quiet calm.

Externally consider

All around us is data in the form of impressions. Taking in impressions gives the mind more substance to work with. To maximise the number of impressions we can receive necessitates the employment of all the senses. Our normal attention shifts between inner and outer concerns; when our attention is turned inward it is occupied with personal, subjective matters, and it is easy to spend long periods in this mode until an external event shakes us awake from our daydreams. To observe more fully and improve the quality of impressions, the senses need to be turned outward and extended as far as possible. This attention to the world should be open and general, not allowing itself to be caught and held by particular items of interest. Placing one's attention outwards is often accompanied by a sense of 'waking up' and an enhanced awareness of one's environment such that it appears more clear and vivid.

Focussing on particular impressions that catch the attention can lead to chains of associations that distract the mind from what is currently happening, so constant monitoring is required in order to maintain awareness in the present. Effort is needed not to comment on what is being observed as it detracts from the experience itself. With some practice more awareness develops and one becomes

more alert to changes in the environment. The method allows the individual's inner intuitive senses to be honed. This wider perception expands the sense of scale, the picture becomes bigger.

An inward-looking mind concerns itself with past and future events, list making, daydreams and the like, thus creating an inner world of personal concerns that takes little account of the immediate surroundings. Thoughts and feelings that one constantly identifies with create this personal sphere of virtual reality.

Directing attention outward enables one to perceive the relationship of self and other. Having a standpoint defines a place from which to act. The word *consideration* implies an association with otherness, whether it is the environment or another person. Consideration substantiates relationships. Taking real notice of another person, taking the time to observe them, means that 'you can stand in their shoes' and have a chance of real understanding. To see what is really needed in a situation requires sensitive awareness of the circumstances.

Choose to look, or choose not to look, with all the senses. Such a choice is our birthright: to add to creation or disregard it. Disregarding it, it too will disregard you. Involve yourself in creation and it too will involve you. Rather, stand at the razor's edge between detachment and involvement; then you too can realise that which passes by. Do not be overcome by these creations, for that way lies drowning in the waters of death. Choose life: with firm heart, stout body, and with equanimity of mind, see all that arises and passes away. Do not try to remember it or to pass judgement upon it, neither try to perpetuate it, glorious though it may be, for it has its own course and direction and will take you with it. If you can do this, there is that in you which will grow accordingly.

Neither accept nor reject

My world could be divided into things I like, things I don't like and things that don't concern me at all. This might sound like a very shallow comment on human nature but people formulate most of their decisions (even the big ones) on this very simple premise. Man is a feeling creature that is drawn to pleasure and avoids pain or discomfort. There is acceptance and approval of those things, including ideas and opinions, that match our viewpoint or sense of good taste: anything that we find boring or unattractive we deal with by rejection or lack of interest.

The term 'comfort zone' describes a self-created environment that is agreeable and familiar. This environment has been shaped by previous choices of a feeling nature that have been repeated. We all know the scenario of our favourite chair, television programme, even the way our coffee is made. Over time routine pleasures become set and inflexible, so much so that it becomes difficult to do anything that is not tried and tested. What we dislike can also define our world. Something as superficial as not finding a person physically attractive may be enough to limit the desire to become acquainted with that person. Anything that seems to be difficult we may refuse to attempt, for fear of failure. Overcoming prejudice requires an element of consciousness to perceive how easily we succumb to personal preference.

Subscribing to likes and dislikes eventually makes one less and less flexible, defining us by what we identify with. To live in a bigger world you have to stretch the boundaries. Recognise what you are attached to and make a point of being open to new experiences and ideas. Look at your current

prejudices afresh as they occur and test them for objectivity. A mind that is open and flexible has more capacity to grow.

Many formulations have arisen of the Law that governs mankind. It is inevitable that a man will accept the truths which accord most closely with his own nature, and to deny the truths in those that seem foreign to him. Be wary of accepting or rejecting such bodies of knowledge, and the tenets belonging to them. In truth, test them thoroughly, prove and verify in the cauldron of your own experience.

Be not harsh in judgement: if you do not understand, let it pass to another day when the light of knowledge may illumine you. Try not to mix one coherent body of knowledge with another, for that will tend to confuse you. If you consider to have proven a precept as true (for now) it will govern your tastes and actions. Know that this will bind you, yet without such binding no freedom is possible.

Do not criticise oneself or others

This discipline is concerned with the personal viewpoint of the individual, and the judgement of self or others arising from this subjective way of perceiving the world. Criticism limits our ability to deal with the world freshly and creatively because it is very much bound in past experience, much of it conditioned in the formative years. Over time we become entrenched in our opinions regardless of, even oblivious of the reality of current circumstance. The early factors that help condition the critical tendency of the mind are upbringing, education, society and peer groups. By adulthood, there is a wealth of judgements hardwired in. These value judgements are embedded deeply in the mind, and because of absolute familiarity feel totally normal and natural. We have a benchmark of opinion and acceptable behaviour that seems to us to be sound and therefore gives us the right to pronounce on the behaviour and opinion of others as we see fit.

Of course we don't always live up to our own personal ideals and expectations, and often proceed to castigate ourselves for this failure. As a result of this we become internally divided and waste energy belittling ourselves. This too can become a habit and we become our own worst enemy, undermining the sense of worth. If there is negative feeling about oneself, there is less freedom to act. Self doubt, a sense of inadequacy and worry about losing the good opinion of others all generate inhibition, and opportunities for growth may be lost through fear of stepping outside social parameters.

Certain qualities are needed to combat constant censorship. Humility helps us recognise if we are being self-important. Courage is required if we desire to act in a way that does not meet the expectations of others, to go against the status quo. Criticism is a way of inflating the ego and affirming the already known and the familiar, often at the expense of others. The direction of conscious work is towards the unknown, the new; it is based on the premise that there is always further to go.

Observation is a good way to change the habit of criticising. Noticing the internal censor operating is the first step, catching the moment when that abrasive thought comes into one's mind; once you can do that there is a chance of halting the process before it goes further. With repeated practice the desire to criticise gradually weakens; fortunately the human mind is pliable and changing its organisation is possible with sustained effort. Reducing the instances of inner censorship, refusing to be drawn into the

criticisms of others, means we can conserve the energy that is otherwise used in maintaining past identifications. Creating division in ourselves through criticism causes confusion and dissatisfaction. Criticising others means eroding commonality with one's fellow man. Ceasing to criticise serves to loosen the bindings of conditioned thought and releases energy that can be put into willed activity.

Constructive criticism aims to improve, to seek to attain a better or the best of something. But criticism that is negative tends to devalue or invalidate what exists, even though at root its motivation may be for the good. To criticise events amounts to an attempt to negate what is, to deny it. Rather, observe carefully and dispassionately what is, and try not to add to or subtract from this. If you can add constructively to any situation then do so, otherwise let it alone.

Speak and act only as necessary

Any great enterprise needs energy; inner change has to be fuelled otherwise nothing will happen. Energy is a limited commodity and is easily wasted in daydreaming, negative emotion, worry and doubt. Physically, it can be wasted unknowingly in habitual tension and stress in the muscles of the body.

In a busy world we demand much of ourselves in the form of productive activity. To stop and sit quietly seems non-productive and therefore undesirable either in our eyes or those of others. Relaxation and reflection is economical as far as energy conservation is concerned, allowing us to recharge our psychic batteries. Studies on brainwave activity show a decrease in speed of electrical output during relaxation; correspondingly the waves become deeper and more rhythmical. The slowing down shifts emphasis from the usually dominant left brain hemisphere which deals with logic and reasoning to the more sensory, artistic right brain, thus striking a more even balance. Even at your busiest times you can make your efforts more economical; you can work in a more streamlined way or cut back on the number of tasks you have set yourself.

The associative mind, where one thought leads to another and another by a train of association, is the habitual mode of mind. This is why, when we are conversing, one train of thought branches out into a multiplicity of others. The flow of conversation can become stilted if first one person then the other follows different associations; at this point they may even end up talking to themselves! Unnecessary speech can manifest as internal chatter, talking excessively is tiring and a great deal of energy is used by constantly talking to oneself!

The economical use of energy equals more power. There can be no power when energy is constantly leaking away. Power can be used in action, as necessary, or directed into being and inner development.

We partake of life in all our actions and words, and so contribute as best we can. For each and every action there are results, and similarly, of course, for no action. How do we gauge what is necessary? And necessary for what? Some will say that the word or action that is most fitting to a situation is what is necessary and that, if this results in greater harmony, then it is good. Others maintain that to act or speak through wisdom is necessary, regardless of harmony. But how are we to judge which course to apply? To recognise what is necessary requires a degree of knowledge, so seek knowledge first, and hope that your words and actions will fit what is necessary.

Actively investigate

A young child playing shows a great deal of curiosity; touching, pulling, even tasting an object that has caught its attention. Nothing is boring, and even the repetitious action of putting articles in a box and taking them out again seems to hold a fascination. This simple curiosity is experienced far less in adulthood where the world is very familiar and we work in competent, repeated routines which absorb most of our attention. Leisure time is often spent in passive pastimes such as relaxation, eating and drinking and watching television in preference to the pursuit of new experience. On getting up in the morning one can pretty much predict the routine course of the day, barring accidents or earthquakes.

Remembering to actively investigate is to provide you with a wake-up call. If you do the same old things, you'll stay in the same old place. Everything is unremittingly familiar because you see it from your habitual, utilitarian outlook. Under normal circumstances the new only comes infrequently, maybe a holiday or a chance happening such as an external disruption. A freak weather occurrence such as a raging storm with lightning and high winds can be exciting but also threatening because of its unpredictable nature. Actively seeking the new can mean doing something unfamiliar that promotes change and shifts personal perspective. The effort is to 'get up off your backside'; otherwise in the sense of psychic growth you'll be stuck where you are now.

Ways of seeking the new can be light and playful, even mischievous, or they may be serious and profound. Any circumstance can become an opportunity; for instance using the left hand for simple tasks instead of the right, or vice versa for the left-handed. Other instances could be looking at the space between things instead of the objects themselves, or upsetting the status quo in social conversation by asking 'bigger' questions instead of making small talk.

In your lifetime there may come a moment when a major change becomes possible if grasped with both hands! Exploration is the antithesis of stagnation yet requires courage for both the big and the small changes. Curiosity is the spark that, when kindled, leads to the study of new subjects and finding new research in your own area of expertise. The onus is very much on the individual to creatively seek out new ways of exploration.

He or she who seeks to know the laws under which mankind is bound must necessarily interact with the world. It is then not sufficient to simply 'sit and stare', though indeed this must be done. Active investigation is necessary to learn how things work and hold together. If you would gain mastery of any trade or activity, you must approach it from all possible angles, and test your learning or skill and your knowledge of the material being worked upon. Only active investigation suffices here. "Seek and ye shall find" – but keep seeking!

Knowledge is not information

Modern man is a great consumer of information from many sources. From a knowledge perspective the purpose of information is to provide input. All data comes through the senses in the form of impressions. Mind constantly processes data and organises it before passing it into memory. Knowledge is not academic; a person may read the most learned tomes and become very well informed

but still not possess it. Knowledge is always experiential; it impinges on the self and causes change, it transforms. A moment of knowledge may come at a critical moment such as a birth or a death when awareness is heightened beyond the ordinary. It may occur too in sexual experience, reminding one of the term 'carnal knowledge'. Transformation can occur at the cellular level between long established couples; this is borne out in recent scientific evidence which shows that a transplanted organ from a close partner can actually be accepted more readily than a more exact tissue match from a stranger.

Knowledge comes from the pre-conscious. It reveals itself at the forefront of mind without going through the usual processes of reasoning and association. In a moment a fully formed revelation can come that is absolutely clear, almost as if you had known it all along but it had been hidden. Sometimes it comes after a long period of gestation, sometimes instantly, for example when you look into a stranger's eyes and feel you 'know' them. You may not know the how or why but you do recognise something important is happening. Knowledge is characterised by a sense of potency and a feeling of something awakened that had been sleeping. It carries the sensation that a contact has been made with something 'other'.

All ten of the disciplines in personal responsibility work on awakening the moral sense of the individual. The quiet voice of conscience and the apprehension of knowledge both require the same sensitivity.

What we know about the world depends on our senses, gross or subtle, external or internal. All living beings acquire information, using it to cope with their environment. Human beings are particularly successful in manipulating their environment, using information gathered over generations. In so doing they gain and enjoy power for themselves and over others.

But the power that is inherent in the nature of things is not to be gained through information. We must relinquish our craving for information and power, if we are to drink of the well of knowledge. For if we were informed of all that is, what would we be?

Refine observation

Refining observation requires receptivity and sensitivity. When the mind is quiet, more impressions can be received consciously. A busy, occupied mind takes in crude impressions, being only half aware of its surroundings. Walking down a busy street, we can be oblivious of what is going on or who we see. What we do perceive is governed by what captures our interest. The basic impressions we receive can be refined by learning to take in the totality of what is around, and holding a sense of that totality without being caught or 'hooked' by any particular item. This sounds easy to do but it requires effort to maintain as the usual mode of mind is to fix attention first on this thing, then that. When attention is caught, it triggers streams of association and the mind turns inwardly to the personal subjective world.

As observation becomes refined there is an opportunity to encompass much more of the present moment. There can be a sense of removing filters from one's perception and more information becomes available. The five senses are very active but a sense of our internal state can also be encompassed, giving information about such things as mood, body awareness and breathing. This

practice develops sustained attention, which is a prized skill to any meditator who needs to keep attention on a meditation object for long periods at a time.

A very simple exercise can be to look at one thing; any ordinary thing will do, for example a chair. Direct your attention onto it lightly and just observe it for five minutes, appreciating all its qualities. At the end of five minutes reflect on how much you apprehended. Don't be concerned by how many times your mind wanders during the exercise; it can be surprising to have it demonstrated that even a minute's sustained focus is a tricky feat. When you notice that your attention has strayed, just gently re-establish attention onto the object. Not only is this practice very useful in training observation, it also has the added benefit of leaving the mind clear and refreshed.

Refined observations serve as energy or food for the finer mechanisms within us, allowing access to higher mental and emotional centres.

Most of what we consider we have observed has been cursory. Real observation requires attention and alertness, unclouded by desire or fear. All beings emit and receive data, or impressions, and these impressions are food for us. We grow, in part, according to our ability to process these impressions.

Who would grow more subtle bodies in the four worlds requires more subtle impressions and needs to practise more refined observation. Further, observation is not limited to the visual field, for you can observe (and formulate if you dare) that which is unseen.

Speak only from experience

The essence of this discipline is truth and honesty. To be clear-sighted it is necessary to be scrupulously honest and straightforward in one's dealings; anything less and boundaries become blurred. In the ordinary moral sense people regard themselves as honest, but may deceive if they feel they are in the right to do so. A person may think they give good value in the workplace yet still feel entitled to inflate their expenses claim. This type of dishonesty is commonplace and has its root in human greed. The problem is further compounded by going unrecognised, or being seen as acceptable because 'everyone else does it'.

Speaking only from experience is the effort to get to the truth in everything you say and think. When giving an account of what you have done or what you have observed, keep it simple without exaggeration or elaboration. Don't be tempted to cover 'gaps' in memory by filling them in. Stick to the facts you can recall without trying to make them fit into a more cohesive story. It is always tempting to make one's conversation more entertaining by embellishment; the danger of this is the mixing of imagination and reality. This blurs the truth of the account; the events that are being related are changed in such a way so as to make one more important, daring or attractive and it takes an effort of will not to varnish the account. Wanting to see oneself in a good light means losing an opportunity to be candid about who one is. 'Know thyself' in any meaningful sense means being objective about what you tell yourself. Listening carefully to the voice in your head can be very revealing.

When something is repeated, such as a media headline, it enters into the general psyche through that repetition. Currently, television and newspapers refer to the credit crunch and looming economic

disaster. Is this true for you? For others that you observe? Too often the belief prevails that if something is repeated often enough, it must be true. If I tell myself something often enough it can gradually become a part of my own psychological makeup. Speaking from experience clarifies the real relationship we have with ourselves by the development of discrimination.

If we speak from hearsay or from what we have read, we convey information – often useful to others – and we spend most of our lives in these interactions with others. Such information is second hand at best, and where this predominates we echo and perpetuate virtual worlds; that is to say, worlds that are a step removed from the real world. But when we speak from direct experience, we bring the reality of that about which we speak a little closer to our audience. If others are exposed to a more real world, they too can partake of that reality almost as if it were present there and then.