

BUDDHISM AND THE ENNEAGRAM EXPERIENTIAL ELECTIVE

Introduction

My elective experience was a retreat entitled the "Buddhism and the Enneagram" offered by meditation teacher and Enneagram enthusiast, Susan Piver. I attended this retreat in Austin, Texas, from October 11 to 15, 2023, which was just one week after I returned home from my Vital medicine retreat in Jamaica. Prior to going to the Enneagram retreat, I was concerned that attending these retreats back-to-back would have a negative impact on me given the amount of time I would need to take off from work and be away from my family. I also questioned whether it would be better to take some time after the medicine retreat for any insights to fully integrate before embarking on another inner work experience. In retrospect, attending this experiential elective directly after the medicine retreat was a critical component of the integration of the insights I gained during my medicine retreat experience. By attending the elective retreat while still in the integration phase in the aftermath of the medicine retreat, I was more open to directly experiencing the full benefits of the Buddhism and the Enneagram retreat at a non-intellectual level.

Preparation

I first heard about the Buddhism and the Enneagram retreat by chance. While I was visiting Austin, Texas to attend a 3-night series of concerts by my favorite band, All Them Witches, a friend of mine was also in Austin at the same time attending a meditation and writing retreat lead by Susan Piver. Knowing my passion for the Enneagram, my friend mentioned that Susan was planning an Enneagram retreat later in the year and suggested that I investigate it. When I saw that it was a retreat combining Buddhism and the Enneagram, I knew I found my experiential elective. Some of my earliest inner work involved learning about Buddhism, its philosophy, and its meditation techniques. In more recent years, I have become fascinated with the Enneagram and consider it one of the most powerful tools I have used

to learn more about myself and to grow spiritually. Prior to learning about this retreat, I had already been integrating the Enneagram into my psychedelic facilitation and integration practice, and I was excited to see how it could be used in a retreat setting, not only for my own personal growth but also to gain some insights in how to structure my own one-on-one and group sessions in the future. The synchronicity was too much to ignore, and I signed up as soon as I could.

I was hoping to use this retreat experience to further my own spiritual growth, but also to develop my new facilitation and integration practice that was a motivating factor in my decision to join Vital. To prepare for this unique experience, I read Susan Piver's book "The Buddhist Enneagram" and I utilized my existing knowledge of the Enneagram to develop an intention for both the Jamaica retreat and the Enneagram retreat. My intention was in the form of the following question: "How do I accept reality as it is." My prior understanding of the Enneagram taught me that as an Enneagram Type 1, I tend to always focus on how to improve things. Type 1s notice the gap between what is and what could be. While this can have its advantages, when left unchecked, it can lead to an unconscious drive to always correct things and strictly seek that things be "right" or "perfect." By learning to accept reality as it is, Type 1s can tap into a larger sense of perfection. The type of perfection that comes from patiently learning from mistakes and letting things unfold as they were meant to. I had learned this from an intellectual perspective, but heading into these back-to-back retreats, I set out to experience this understanding of the Enneagram directly.

The Experience

The Buddhism and the Enneagram retreat itself was comprised of a hefty dose of learning the details of the Enneagram system, several meditation sessions, and some journaling exercises. The teachings included some open dialogue among people of different Enneagram Types so we could gain a better perspective on how the different Types see the world. To hear someone else's direct experience

of living in the world as a particular Enneagram Type, rather than reading about the external traits a person of that Type, was profoundly informative. In a very real sense, it brought the Enneagram to life for me and infused it with a bit of magic. An important take away for me was how Susan Piver lead these discussions and dialogues. Whenever one of the retreat participants, including myself, had a specific question about the Enneagram, rather than responding with detailed facts, Susan skillfully nudged participants towards self-reflection, favoring inquiry over direct answers. I saw the immediate effect this had on me and the other participants, and I hope to cultivate this skill and utilize it in my own facilitation and integration practice in the future.

In addition to these dialogues, the retreat participants engaged in multiple meditation sessions each day. Susan taught us the Buddhist meditation technique of samatha-vipassana. At its core, this technique is simply to sit with your breath. Susan walked us through the instructions to set up a proper posture for the sitting and to begin the meditation. We sat with a solid posture, but with soft shoulders and a relaxed front of the body. Closed mouth with slightly parted lips, and open eyes with a soft gaze. As Susan would frequently say, “and then we just sit and breath.” An important instruction for me was how Susan made a distinction between observing the breath and feeling the breath, with a preference towards feeling. While I have practiced samatha-vipassana meditation in the past, this simple instruction made a significant difference for me. It made the practice a deeply somatic experience, rather than a mental exercise. I suspect this was particularly helpful for me, since Enneagram Type 1s are one of three “body types” that operate from a somatic and instinctual stance. This way of being in the world contrasts with the three “feeling types,” who operate primarily from their emotions/heart center, and the three “thinking types,” who most naturally operate from mental activity. The simple instruction to *feel* the breath brought my awareness deep into my body and was one of many subtle takeaways from Susan’s teachings that allowed me to directly experience the Enneagram rather than intellectually learn about it.

The simplicity of this meditation practice was also an important lesson for me. I have learned many

meditation techniques over several years of persistent, although sporadically infrequent, meditation practice. Some of these techniques have been more complicated and elaborate than others. In many ways the simplicity of the samatha-vipassana practice helped me reconnect with the origins of my spiritual journey.

As noted above, the retreat also included a substantial amount of journaling time. Another highlight of this retreat experience was the journal session that Susan dubbed “Journaling into the Eclipse.” The retreat involved a serendipitous alignment with a solar eclipse that was within viewing range in Austin, Texas on the last full day of the retreat. Susan took full advantage of this celestial event and created a journaling exercise around it, which added an unexpected layer of depth to the collective retreat experience for the participants.

We began the journaling exercise before the eclipse began and ended with a meditation in the darkness during the peak of the eclipse. Under Susan’s direction, this journaling exercise became a deliberate act of shedding and rebirth. As part of the integration work for my medicine retreat, I wanted to explore my more expressive and magical side, and the “Journaling into the Eclipse” provided the perfect opportunity for that. For me, this journaling session was a more poetic process than I would typically engage in. I used it as an opportunity to throw certain aspects of my personality into the ring of fire of the eclipse to be burned away. Certain aspects of my being that were brought to the forefront of my awareness during my medicine retreat, such as self-doubt, self-criticism, self-hatred, negativity, and tension, were all burned into the eclipse through this journaling experience. Once these were burned away, new aspects of myself were able to emerge. In this exercise, I found a new strength, a deepened capacity to feel and process my emotions, a new sense of being part of a larger community, and a new patience for letting people be where they are in their life. I ended my journaling session with an expression of loving kindness to all beings, and then we collectively sat in meditation to let it all sink in.

Theoretical Perspective

To give this journaling experience context, it is worth mentioning some of the theoretical aspects that I gained deeper insight into during this retreat. One such aspect is the concept of shadow work. One of the magical things of the Enneagram symbol itself is the importance of each of the lines and the meaning behind how different Types are connected to each other. Within the Enneagram symbol, each Type is connected to two other Types. One of these connection points represents the Point of Integration. Someone that is healthy and growing can start taking on aspects of the personality of the Type at the Point of Integration. Conversely, the other line connects to the Point of Disintegration. When under stress, we can start to take on the negative aspects of the Type at the Point of Disintegration. In other words, the Point of Disintegration can be seen as our shadow side. For me, as a Type 1, my shadow side lives in the emotional aspects of Type 4, the Point of Disintegration for Type 1. During the Enneagram retreat, I began to make sense of certain aspects of my medicine retreat, which I now saw as a moment of directly confronting my shadow side by exploring the emotional energies typically associated with Type 4. At certain times during my medicine retreat, it felt as if I were under a lot of stress. The bodily tension and the pain that I felt within myself and others in the room was quite intense. Eventually this intensity consumed me and culminated in an intense release of energy (including a surprisingly deep yell) after which I felt a profound sense of ease and calm. Through my Enneagram explorations, I now understand this to have been a surrendering to my shadow side and the integration of my otherwise repressed emotions (which are the hallmark of Type 4) into my conscious awareness.

Integration

As I reflect back on my experiences attending the Buddhism and the Enneagram retreat, I've found that in the weeks and months since the retreat many of its lessons have become integrated into my daily life and practice. The eloquence of Enneagram teachings, the simplicity of meditation, and the

transformative magic of the eclipse's journaling session have become integral components of my spiritual journey. I have a deeper and more magical understanding of the structure of the Enneagram and how inter-related each of the Types are (as represented by the lines within the Enneagram symbol). I have started to share this magic with others in my facilitation and integration practice. For the first time in a couple of years, I have consistently maintained a daily meditation practice since returning home from the retreat. The simplicity of Susan's methods has made sitting in meditation a necessary part of my daily routine. Finally, I continue to be amazed at the lasting effects the purging exercise of burning away some tensions that I have held onto for so long has had on how I operate in the world. By releasing these tensions during my medicine retreat and then ritualistically burning them away into the eclipse has left me with a felt sense of being more open and willing to engage in the world in a new way.

This retreat, serendipitously positioned after the medicine retreat experience, was not a scheduling conflict I had to manage nor an overdose of inner work that I had originally feared. Instead, the coupling these retreats in close proximity created a harmonious melody, allowing the insights from my medicine retreat to fully integrate into my daily life and lay the groundwork for my own future inner work and my budding facilitation and integration practice.