

Spiritual Retreat Instructions

Turn any moment, day, event, activity, trip, or formal retreat into a meaningful spiritual experience. By using capping phrases and/or haiku poetry, you can maximize turning your moments of insight into lasting self transformations. “Name it and claim it” is a way of using language to give yourself a “handle” to make your experience accessible and available for further elaboration and growth.

I. Is Your Switch On? Prime the Pump.

First, you have to “prime” yourself by having a mental set that there are teachings all around you waiting to be discovered. Turn on an inner switch that puts you into a retreat-mode attitude. This retreat mode is an attitude of being open and receptive, rather than assertive and manipulative. Do not actively assert your own agenda or expectations upon your surroundings. Instead, be gently mindful of what you’re doing and quietly observant of what is happening around you. Accept the moment for what it brings you, rather than judging the moment. Welcome surprises!

II. Cultivate Mindful Awareness

Through your heightened sense of awareness, something interesting will catch your attention. Allow yourself to be drawn into it so that you notice more and more about it. Like a prospector panning for gold, look carefully for the sparkle of insight hidden in the sand of your mundane observations.

Pay particular attention to when you have “negative” feelings; such as, dislike, boredom, frustration, or even a flash of anger or despair. Such moments offer special opportunities for personal growth. Through honest introspection, negative feelings can be the source of transformative experiences. Like the saying goes, “A diamond is a lump of coal that made good under pressure.” My personal favorite is, “BM is fertilizer too!”

III. Write It Down. Keep a Journal.

Have the mental set that you will discover (at least) one hidden gem within a given activity, or during a particular day, or for the whole retreat itself. Crystallize your experience by describing it with one word or phrase, or write a haiku poem about your experience. Doing this will solidify your experience and provide a “hook” upon which additional relevant associations and insights can be hung. The result will be a meaningful personal teaching or perhaps even your own philosophy of life.

IV. Examples

A. Hidden Stones

A retreat participant was planting flowers around what used to be an old farmhouse. As she worked in the soil, she dug up a fist-sized stone, then another, and another-- all in a row! She realized that these stones had once formed a border for a garden around the house. She felt a warm closeness and continuity with whoever had originally placed these stones. As she related her experience to me, I suggested “Hidden Stones” as a kind of label, handle, personal code phrase, or “capping phrase” which would always remind her of that particular experience. I further suggested that she could use the phrase “Hidden Stones” as a spiritual tool or teaching by applying it as a means of finding hidden gems of insight while doing her own mental digging (introspections).

B. Hardy Weed

“On a quiet, sunny morning I was pulling weeds in a small patch of pea plants. As I pulled on one weed, its root kept coming and coming. Wow! The root must have been ten times longer than the body of the plant. I couldn’t help but recall my teacher’s description of his training. He had been a monk of low status and other monks made things very difficult for him. He explained that because of this, his roots grew deep within himself. From this I could see why his spiritual understanding could be so simple and sincere, and yet have such depth. That small weed taught me to look within and to root myself deep in the teachings. It taught me to disregard appearances and not to be misled by what is on the surface. I hope that I can become a small, hardy weed with a deep root.”

The accompanying haiku poem is:

Digging up
The small weed’s root
It’s long!

C. One Smiling Face!

“Anyone who has ridden a crowded bus during the summer in Kyoto, Japan, knows how miserable it is. One day I was on such a bus, making the best of it, when among the sea of solemn faces was one beaming young lady. She was oblivious of her surroundings and it seemed she didn’t even know she was smiling. She was so happy that the happiness just had to show itself. Her face lit up the whole bus and made my day. She will never know how much her smile affected me. Her smile said to me, ‘Be happy! You have the power to be the way you want to be. You create the atmosphere around you and carry it with you all day. You have been overly conditioned to control your emotions and have forgotten how to soar. Throw out your hands to the sky!’”

The accompanying haiku poem is:

A crowded bus
Aching, sweating bodies
One smiling face!

D. Code Phrase: Morning Glory

Capping Phrase: Live Like a Flower Blooms

“I was walking the dog on a quiet summer morning. We left the sidewalk to explore an empty lot. At the far end, among chunks of concrete and dried-up weeds, I was surprised by a single beautiful morning glory. Its brilliant red and white colors took my breath away. It was blooming with all its might, petals spread proudly to the sky. My first thought was, “Oh morning glory, don’t you know no one will see you here!” But immediately I knew that the morning glory didn’t care about that or about anything else; it was “doing its thing” totally. If only I could live like this, with no interfering emotions and concepts, with just a total, complete expression of my being.”

The accompanying haiku poem is:

Morning glory
Blooming with a shout
Here I am!

The shout “Here I am!” can be likened to Gautama Buddha’s famous birth cry, or for that matter, any baby’s birth cry. Such a cry is an absolute, total expression of being or life. It is pure and untainted by any feelings of embarrassment or comparisons. It is selfless and beyond any labels of superiority or inferiority. In contrast, we humans become conditioned and can easily victimize ourselves through labels of social roles, class, ism’s, and all categorical labels that we use to define ourselves.

The shout can also be related to these words by Haya Akegarasu:

“When I refer to ‘foreign language’ I don’t mean English, German, Russian, or any language of that kind. Regardless of the language I use, if my blood circulates in it, it is my own language, the words are mine. There are two languages: one’s own language and a language for the other. The first is the shout and the second is propaganda. Of course one’s tears and blood may be found in propaganda. But it is still very different from the shout, which is entirely one’s own language...”

I want to listen to real words. I want to meet real people. But it is difficult to hear, difficult to meet. I feel lonely, because in most cases I hear words that are built up in combinations--children’s blocks! There is no life in ten thousand words built up like combinations of blocks taken from here and there. Those who have no life of their own are always

making such combinations out of other people’s words. No matter what such people say, they are not moved by it, so they cannot move others. If someone is ‘moved’ it is only by a mechanical agreement to be moved...

I want to hear words that are like sparks from red hot iron pounded by a hammer or like drops of blood, or like a stream of tears...” (from *Shout of Buddha*, 1977)

The morning glory story can also be related to an article titled “Awareness” by Gyomay M. Kubose:

“All around us are many wonderful, beautiful things. Basho, the most famous of all Japanese poets, wrote many poems which were expressions of his life. He saw universal life—the pure life—deeply within himself and in all things around him. One of his well-known poems is:

Yoku mire ba	Look carefully
Nazuna hana saku	The nazuna blooms
Kaki ne kana	Along the fence—Ah!

“The *nazuna* is a most insignificant, small flower. Unless one looks very carefully, one will not see it. Unless one understands life deeply, what significance can the *nazuna* have? Wild flowers bloom everywhere. What of them? Perhaps Basho had walked along that fence many times and had been totally unaware of that small, white flower until he saw it that particular morning. It was blooming with every petal, every leaf. How beautiful! When the sun comes, the *nazuna* opens up one-hundred percent. How about me? Am I living like the *nazuna*? I have so many complaints—no inspiration. But look at this small, insignificant wild flower. No one looks at it; no one praises it. However, it lives fully. Basho was inspired to live like the *nazuna* and crystallized his understanding into a 17-syllable haiku poem. Basho received a great lesson from the *nazuna* and this expanded his awareness.

“Unless we are aware, we do not learn anything. We have no inspiration and no teachings. Teachings are all around us—if only we open the mind’s eye to see. Awareness of life is what makes life special. To learn Buddhism is to change one’s life. Regardless of how much we learn, unless your life changes, nothing is learned—it is just accumulated knowledge. Without awareness, it is just another day and another place. To learn Buddhism is to become aware of life, which means to become aware of oneself.” (from *The Center Within*, 1986)

V. Conclusion

All these examples illustrate what is possible; that is, how an ordinary, momentary observation, with awareness, can lead to a significant experience. Over time, other insights can be added to the original experience, making for an even richer, ever-expanding personal teaching.

A “capping phrase” can evolve into what is called “Turning Words” which are words that have the power to turn one’s life around. Such words, whether a composed haiku poem or a personal code phrase that has meaning only for oneself, is like the handle of a large suitcase, stuffed full of teachings that have had personal impact on one’s spiritual journey. The handle enables one to access easily the complete contents of the suitcase.

Another interesting metaphor is to liken Turning Words to the tip of an iceberg. One sees only one-tenth of an iceberg’s mass above the surface, while nine-tenths is unseen below the surface. When a Shin Buddhist recites, “Namo Amida Butsu,” this is just the surface tip of a huge unseen Other Power that is Amida Buddha’s Great Compassion that underlies one’s individual life. A personal example: Whenever parting in the morning, my wife and I flash our code gesture of a single index finger, meaning “oneness.” This is not just an expression of our feelings for one another but represents thirty-nine years of shared life together, full of both joys and hardships. The simple gesture essentially is a teaching or reminder of the wide reality of our relationship with each other.

I offer you this guideline called “Spiritual Retreat Instructions” as a way to enhance and deepen your spiritual journey.

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