

What to Expect and Do After a Mindfulness Retreat ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 Upon leaving the retreat, some things that are good to keep in mind.

00:00:18 Exactly one of four things will occur in the days subsequent to this retreat for all of
00:00:27 us.

00:00:29 Those of you that have heard this talk before know what those four are.

00:00:34 Can you remember?

00:00:36 It's an exhaustive and exclusive classification of the basic effects of a retreat.

00:00:46 You will either have afterglow only, or you will have aftershock only, or you will have
00:00:57 both, or you will have neither.

00:01:04 What do we mean by afterglow?

00:01:07 Afterglow tends to occur more and more frequently as the months, years, and decades of practice
00:01:17 progress.

00:01:19 It tends to be more and more a predictable result of periods of intensive practice, although
00:01:26 not absolutely guaranteed.

00:01:30 Afterglow means you're calm and peaceful.

00:01:36 You've got all sorts of energy and vitality and cascading insights, maybe even epiphanies.

00:01:46 As I always say, people have no difficulty processing afterglow.

00:01:53 What is aftershock?

00:01:55 Aftershock is you're incredibly sensitive.

00:02:03 Tiny little things rattle your cage.

00:02:09 That's a great expression, rattle the cage, if you've ever thought about it.

00:02:14 The cages are samskaras, right?

00:02:17 Are the limiting forces deep within us.

00:02:22 Things happen in the world, and it rattles that prison of the habit forces.

00:02:33 That's okay, because otherwise the bars of that prison will never be broken without them
00:02:41 being rattled within the context of the practice.

00:02:50 When it happens during a retreat, it's called yogi mind.

00:02:56 Yogi in the Buddhist context means us, meditators, yogis.

00:03:04 That's like hypersensitivity and things just causing ballistic reactions and so forth.

00:03:14 That's a natural part of this path, a part of the deep insights and purification.

00:03:23 When it happens during a retreat, we call it yogi mind.

00:03:26 When it happens after a retreat, I call it, my own word for it is aftershock.

00:03:32 You're really sensitive and vulnerable and there's no skin on you to shield you from
00:03:43 the insanity of the 7-11.

00:03:51 Also this sense of stuff percolating up from the inside, like there's nothing holding it
00:03:58 down.

00:04:00 Your ordinary ordering principle seems to have been blown away.

00:04:06 That's the price you pay for deciding that you want to have an extraordinary ordering
00:04:11 principle.
00:04:14 We have a way that we were stable.
00:04:20 It works, but we can be destabilized.
00:04:22 We want to have a deeper kind of stability.
00:04:27 We may have to go through a temporary period of instability.
00:04:31 Then we go to this new depth.
00:04:37 It may seem that you've lost your ordinary ordering principle.
00:04:41 Don't worry about it.
00:04:42 You're on the path to an extraordinary ordering principle.
00:04:48 There can be, because of that, a sense of disorientation and so forth.
00:04:56 These are the phenomena of aftershock.
00:05:05 I'm not saying you will have aftershock, but some people do.
00:05:11 If you do have aftershock, all you have to do is remember two things, why it's happening
00:05:18 and what to do about it.
00:05:21 If you remember those two things, you'll be fine.
00:05:24 This path is a path of learning a new coping mechanism for human
00:05:38 existence.
00:05:40 The normal coping mechanism for human existence could be characterized by the phrase, tighten
00:05:47 up and turn away.
00:05:49 The tighten up meaning don't have equanimity and the turn away meaning don't be clear,
00:05:55 don't pay attention to things.
00:05:58 If we're learning clarity and equanimity, then we're in a sense learning the opposite
00:06:07 coping mechanism that most people use.
00:06:13 Since the two coping mechanisms are in some sense diametrically opposed, we can't avoid
00:06:21 from time to time in our growth process what I call awkward intermediate stages where the
00:06:28 old coping mechanism has been somewhat shed.
00:06:33 The mesh of the being is somewhat open, but it's not so fully open that things just pass
00:06:40 through.
00:06:42 It's not closed the way it used to be that relatively shields us, but not really.
00:06:50 In that awkward intermediate zone, we get aftershock phenomena.
00:06:55 That's why we feel vulnerable, disoriented, sensitive to the big three, anger, fear, sadness
00:07:09 in various forms.
00:07:11 Our cage gets rattled and so forth.
00:07:18 There's an old cliché about the only cure for the ills of democracy is yet more democracy.
00:07:26 The only cure for the ills of these temporary side effects of the panacea and powerful radical
00:07:36 medicine called mindfulness is more mindfulness.
00:07:42 That's why it's happening.
00:07:44 What to do about it?
00:07:45 Recycle the reactions.
00:07:47 The practice caused reactions.
00:07:51 The reactions come up in touch, feel, image, talk, typically feel, image, talk, typically

00:07:56 feel.

00:07:59 What to do?

00:08:00 Well, you have techniques and you apply the techniques to those reactions.

00:08:08 That optimizes the growth process.

00:08:13 What if you can't remember that to do that?

00:08:20 Because I sometimes say that there's an inverse relationship between activation of feel space

00:08:30 and IQ.

00:08:32 Have you noticed?

00:08:36 This is something that we humans, this is one of the great humility pieces of being

00:08:43 human.

00:08:46 At least it has been for me to acknowledge that as feel space gets activated, particularly

00:08:56 with negative feel, my intelligence drops.

00:09:04 Therein we have what is probably the fundamental engineering flaw in our species, which is

00:09:14 that the feel is actually meant to motivate and direct rapid response to situations.

00:09:29 But unfortunately, it can also drive and distort.

00:09:37 A situation comes up, it activates feel, and we need to act, but our intelligence is diminished.

00:09:49 But still we are convinced we have to do something, and therefore what we do is sometimes less

00:09:56 than optimal.

00:09:57 How do you know that?

00:09:59 Because five minutes later or five days later or five years later, you look back and say,

00:10:04 why did I do that?

00:10:11 During times in my life when I've had a lot of emotional stresses, and this phenomenon

00:10:20 has been on the surface day after day after day, which is bad, but also good because you

00:10:28 can get to know it because it's like, hey, it ain't going away.

00:10:34 So you learn things.

00:10:36 One of the things I noticed was, oh yeah, I can see as the feel activates my ability

00:10:43 to organize words, to respond coherently, to think coherently.

00:10:51 I can see it just goes down.

00:10:54 When I realize that, it's like, OK, I'm like room temperature IQ now, and I'm trying to

00:11:04 respond to this complex situation.

00:11:09 I realized, oh, I shouldn't be doing this.

00:11:12 I just have to walk away and just meditate until I get a little smarter again.

00:11:23 So in any event, you'd be amazed that you may not be able to remember what I just said

00:11:31 when the doo-doo hits the fan.

00:11:34 Then you're going to need to remember something simpler than this formulation.

00:11:41 That thing you need to remember is the location of my telephone number or someone like me

00:11:48 who can remind you of what you already know and then take you through step by step.

00:11:57 When I get calls from people, so here's how it works.

00:12:00 I think you all know this, but let me just repeat it.

00:12:04 So I turn off my phone when I close the Dharma store for the day, whenever that is.

00:12:11 That makes it easy because there's people literally all over the world that may want

00:12:16 to call me, and the rule is simple.

00:12:20 Call.

00:12:22 If the phone rings, the Dharma store is open.

00:12:25 I don't care if it's 3 in the morning, Eastern time where I live, and you'll get me.

00:12:32 If the Dharma store is closed, you'll get the voicemail, and if I'm away on retreat,

00:12:38 that's the bad news.

00:12:40 It may be a while before I can get back to you.

00:12:45 I try, you know, I've been answering calls during this retreat, but I can't necessarily

00:12:55 get back immediately.

00:13:00 You don't have to call me when it's a crisis, though.

00:13:04 You can call for tune-ups or what have you.

00:13:08 When people call and it is a crisis, I'm happy and sad.

00:13:13 I'm sad that the person's in a crisis.

00:13:16 I'm happy because I know there's a, based on years, decades actually of experience,

00:13:23 that there's a very high probability that person, after we've worked together for an

00:13:30 hour or two hours or whatever it is, will experience what I call MMM, maximum meditation

00:13:38 mileage, out of whatever they're going through.

00:13:42 So that's how that works.

00:13:46 So now you know about afterglow, aftershock.

00:13:53 Both could happen at the same time.

00:13:55 You can have the afterglow stuff and the aftershock stuff, or you might not get any of these effects.

00:14:03 Now the tendency is to think, if you don't get afterglow or aftershock, then, oh, well,

00:14:11 you know, it wasn't a productive retreat, but that's not at all true.

00:14:20 The gold standard for when people want me to evaluate, is their practice working?

00:14:29 I never ask them about their subjective experiences while they're doing formal practice.

00:14:40 I only ask one question, and look you around the room, and I know I've asked this question

00:14:43 for about a half the people in this room.

00:14:46 Touch base with your practice.

00:14:48 It's only one question that I ask first, which is, does it seem that you're more fulfilled

00:14:58 and suffering less, and your behaviors are improving in the real world, in daily life?

00:15:05 If the answer is yes, then the practice is on track.

00:15:11 So it doesn't have anything to do with, did you have aftershock, did you have afterglow,

00:15:15 did you have flow, did you have this, did you have that?

00:15:19 It's like, okay, what's the impact in daily life?

00:15:25 So now you know the four things that could happen, and why they're happening, and what

00:15:33 to do about them.

00:15:35 Five things you need to be successful with this practice.

00:15:40 Keep them in mind upon leaving the retreat.

00:15:43 You need to do a little bit of self-practice most days.

00:15:47 I have a ludicrously small minimum, ten minutes, but that's ten minutes of real formal practice,

00:15:55 not ten minutes of bubble bath meditation, or meditation while you're doing tai chi chuan.

00:16:02 Not that there's anything wrong with tai chi chuan, or whatever, but I'm talking about

00:16:06 sitting practice.

00:16:08 If you only do ten minutes, then do it with spoken labels.

00:16:12 So if you don't have quantity, you've got to guarantee quality.

00:16:17 So a little bit of self-practice each day, that's one thing.

00:16:24 A lot of practice every once in a while, typically that's in a group, it's called a retreat,

00:16:31 although you can do self-retreats.

00:16:34 You can just go off by yourself and meditate, but the point is it's like a jam session,

00:16:39 as opposed to daily practice.

00:16:40 You're doing a lot of practice all at once.

00:16:43 That's what we came here, and we have achieved that.

00:16:47 Little bit each day, a lot every once in a while.

00:16:54 You have to make an attempt to bring it into daily life, try to pepper the day with, I

00:17:03 call it practice in life, you know, thirty seconds here, a minute there, while you're

00:17:09 walking to the washroom, while you're waiting in line, go to some technique of your choice,

00:17:17 so that you're not going unconscious, unbroken all day.

00:17:25 Every day there's little, at least surgical strikes in the thrust of life.

00:17:32 You've heard me say over and over again that it is pivotal that you develop the ability

00:17:40 to start on a die.

00:17:44 All rest, sight, sight, all rest, sound, touch, or if I wanted to go in, feel, feel, all rest,

00:18:06 image.

00:18:09 Ready to go anytime, just at the drop of that.

00:18:13 As I said in the group process, why?

00:18:16 Because when stuff comes up in daily life, you've got a magic window of opportunity of

00:18:22 about two to three seconds to establish mindful awareness.

00:18:31 After that, the terrorists are in the cockpit.

00:18:35 They're running the show, and they could well crash your karma.

00:18:47 So there's just that little window, and you have to train yourself to instantly be on

00:18:53 it with some technique in day-to-day life.

00:18:59 Otherwise it goes from sensory experience into objective behavior.

00:19:05 If the objective behavior is driven and distorted, that's called making karma.

00:19:10 Law of karma, what goes around comes around, meaning that there'll be a lot more uncomfortable

00:19:16 feel-image-talk in the end than just that moment of feel-image-talk that you failed

00:19:24 to be complete with.

00:19:26 So it multiplies.

00:19:28 So if possible, we want to avoid that happening.

00:19:33 So a little bit each day, a lot every once in a while.

00:19:39 Pepper the day with micro hits.

00:19:43 And have some sort of regular contact with teacher, coach.

00:19:48 Doesn't have to be just one teacher, and it certainly does not have to be the perfect

00:19:52 master.

00:19:54 Should be somebody competent to guide you.

00:19:59 And typically you're guaranteed of that contact with coach or trainer when you come to retreats

00:20:09 like this.

00:20:11 Or if you do the home practice program, which are telephone-based retreats.

00:20:17 During the self-practice, there's an hour of self-practice in those four hours where

00:20:23 you can call whoever is running the retreat.

00:20:27 That way you can get, theoretically, monthly contact during that retreat situation.

00:20:34 So some sort of contact with somebody who can monitor the big picture of your practice.

00:20:43 So that's four, isn't it?

00:20:45 Little bit each day, a lot every once in a while.

00:20:48 Pepper the day with micro hits at least.

00:20:52 Every once in a while.

00:20:54 Certainly, once, certainly, you know, every six months or so, contact with somebody that's

00:21:01 watching the big picture of your practice.

00:21:04 What's number five?

00:21:05 Number five is keep that up for the duration.

00:21:10 We're in it for the long haul.

00:21:13 Time is basically our ally.

00:21:18 So you get results, some quicker, some not so quick, but you just keep it up.

00:21:27 So those are the five things you need to be successful on this path.

00:21:34 You might say, I don't have much time, that last factor, because I'm old.

00:21:38 And another factor enters in, which is the aging process is a natural enlightenment process.

00:21:49 Now the fact that it doesn't turn into that often is not the fault of nature.

00:21:58 It's the fault of human culture.

00:22:01 But if you have a practice, then it's much more likely to be that.

00:22:06 And so it becomes an ally, it sort of takes you to the no self.

00:22:12 So you've got enough time.

00:22:15 So let's see, four things that can happen after a retreat, five things you need to be

00:22:20 successful with this practice.

00:22:22 So oh, with regards to the periodic retreats, what I recommend is that when you complete

00:22:36 any given retreat, you sign up for the next retreat as a habit.

00:22:42 You mark it on your calendar in ink.

00:22:45 You pay in advance, you put down a deposit.

00:22:50 You tell everyone you're going to do this retreat.

00:22:53 It's a fait accompli.

00:22:56 If every time you complete a retreat, you guarantee, you sign up for the next retreat

00:23:04 and it's on the calendar, then each retreat generates its successor and you're guaranteed

00:23:10 of a lifetime of retreats.

00:23:13 So if you make that habitual, that's very good.

00:23:16 That's a very good thing to do.

00:23:18 I would strongly recommend that.

00:23:23 The very first day I, let's see how our time is doing.

00:23:27 Okay, got a little bit more.

00:23:29 The very first day I talked about what's the big picture.

00:23:35 The big picture is this path is about transcending the self and the world, seeing beyond the

00:23:43 self and the world, in a sense dissolving the self and the world as sensory experience
00:23:51 on one hand and improving the self and the world, improving our individual lives, improving
00:24:01 the situation of humanity.
00:24:06 It's about the complementary relationship of those two.
00:24:14 So as we leave the retreat, it's good to keep that in mind.
00:24:25 We've been mostly doing sadhana, work on ourselves for ourselves.
00:24:30 Now we're going to go out into the world.
00:24:32 I just talked about continuing your sadhana, but we move more towards a service position
00:24:40 as soon as we leave a retreat.
00:24:43 Service in what sense?
00:24:44 Well, at least in the subtle sense.
00:24:46 You remember last night I was saying that the positive changes in our affect, which
00:24:54 is more positive feel, and the tranquility and energy, which is the restful states and
00:25:07 the flow that come about through doing this practice within us, people pick up on that,
00:25:16 albeit perhaps subliminally.
00:25:19 But just walking through the world, you purify the land.
00:25:24 They say the bodhisattva creates a pure land, land in the sense of environment, the whole
00:25:31 environment, including the beings in the environment.
00:25:34 So you will certainly take the effects of this practice with you.
00:25:43 And just walking through the world, just interacting with people at the airport or people you pass
00:25:52 on the street, that's a service that you're doing automatically and effortlessly.
00:26:00 Then there's all the other forms of service, including the explicit service of helping
00:26:12 the conditional happiness of people.
00:26:16 When we go out into the world, we can be doing that.
00:26:20 And then we can help the unconditional happiness of the world, first by that subtle energy
00:26:28 that we put out of joy, tranquility, and the flow of nature flowing through us, perceptible
00:26:38 to others.
00:26:40 And then by describing this practice to people, you can all do that, and some of you by teaching
00:26:47 this practice in an explicit way.
00:26:50 So on leaving a retreat, it's good to remember that all of us are teachers at at least one
00:26:56 of these levels.
00:26:57 So we're going out to teach.