

Preparing for your first meditation retreat

What you need to know before you go

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This is an outline that I came up with after talking to many teachers over a long period of time, doing Goenka Vipassana retreats (referred to here as Goenka retreats), Christian Centering Prayer ten-day retreats, Yogananda Meditation retreat, and most recently a 21-day practice period in the Soto Zen tradition, and meditation retreats in different traditions. For over ten years I've supported dozens of people to prepare for meditation retreats. This is what I have learned.

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The psychology of liminality

You are about to embark on an adventure. Monastic retreats are common across many ancient mystical traditions and they have a common purpose. They are designed to transform you.

Many people have studied these rites and rituals. Specifically, there's been a lot of work around *liminality*, a concept which came out of the study of initiation rites in ancient cultures in the field of anthropology. Initiation rites are designed to help participants transition from one role,

identity, or stage of life, to another. *Liminal* refers to this transition and, more specifically, to the in-between state when the old structure has been discarded and the new one has not yet been adopted. This necessarily involves a period of productive disorientation.

For our purposes, we can boil the large, rich discussion of liminality and initiation rites down to a simple conclusion. We can dramatically change our consciousness by taking ourselves out of the familiar comforts of our daily life and throwing ourselves into a totally novel environment.

As we enter the new environment, the patterns that had previously structured our interaction with the world fall apart, and the things we are used to paying attention to recede from view. Daily routines and cultural norms, ordinary distractions and sources of security, our sense of status, agency, and relationship to authority – all are thrown into disarray.

What results is a sense of disorientation, an open space where our old patterns used to be, and an opportunity for new patterns to arise.

This can happen accidentally, through circumstances outside our control such as natural disasters, and it can also happen by design, as with indigenous initiation rites and monastic retreats.

Rebecca Solnit talks about both kinds of liminal spaces, accidental and intentional, in her book *Paradise Built in Hell*. Drawing on the work of anthropologist Victor Turner, she discusses the similarities between disasters, carnivals, and initiation rites, describing how they are all places in which the ties that are created by ordinary structures and the divides they enforce cease to matter or exist. Differences between people diminish and commonalities matter more. New forms of identity and community are possible, she argues. (See p. 168-9, “Standing on Top of Golden Hours,” *A Paradise Built in Hell*, 2009).

The setting of a retreat is a crucial part of how it creates a liminal space for participants. This is implied partly in the idea of a *retreat*: you leave your normal dwelling and city and usually enter a less developed and less populated area in the country.

But it's more than just location. In a typical monastic retreat, the environment is purposefully minimal. At most retreat centers, for example, there are no televisions, no computers, no newspapers. There are no stores, nothing to buy, and no need to buy anything. Meals are provided. There is a daily schedule, which includes periods of noble silence. Participants don't leave the property for the length of the retreat.

At a Goenka retreat, participants are asked to hand in cell phones, books and writing materials when they arrive at the retreat center. At a ten-day retreat, noble silence is practiced for the first

nine days in full. For these nine days participants don't communicate with others, except for the daily Dharma talks and a short interview period with the course instructors. Moreover, for the majority of the time, there is no movement. You are simply sitting, whether in the meditation hall or in your own room.

The result is an environment very different from our usual one. The regimented daily schedule means that you don't have to make decisions. Without work, commutes, cell phones, news feeds, and conversations with others, we are left without the routines and distractions we typically rely on to get through the day. You can think of it like a sensory deprivation tank, or like a dopamine detox. Psychologically, there is nothing to hold on to. A large part of our egoic programming is disabled and as a result the ego becomes disoriented.

Within this liminal space opportunities for personal transformation arise. We can often be filled with new information, new narratives, and new ways of being, after we go through a challenging withdrawal from our normal lives. From this can arise new states of consciousness, spiritual experiences, a new sense of community and new narratives about who we are.

Rather than describing this at length, we will lean on these traditions' emphasis on direct experience over conceptual explanation. Making meaning before an experience happens can actually hinder the process and take you out of the depth of the experience.

What is valuable, though, is for you to know that you are going on an adventure and that it is meant to dysregulate you. It is designed to be a struggle and a culture shock. There is a powerful technology for personal growth rooted in these ancient traditions. You are going to experience a lot of things outside of your comfort zone. This is good! Trust this process!

This is easier to do when you have a humble appreciation for the technology and at least an initial understanding of the tradition that carries it. Immense human wisdom is embodied in these meditative techniques and monastic traditions, which have arisen across many cultures and been preserved for a very long time. Think of a monastic retreat, with its idiosyncratic routines and rules, as a complex and powerful technology, collectively developed and handed down from one generation to the next for centuries. We should be grateful to the traditions that have carried these techniques into the present so that we can learn from them.

A further note about tradition. There are many monastic traditions. Just to name a few within the Buddhist stream, there are Goenka Vipassana, Insight Meditation, Plum Village, Thai Forest, Tibetan, and Soto Zen. Besides these Buddhist traditions, there are also Sufi, Hindu, Jewish, and Christian monastic traditions. They all differ from each other. They teach different techniques; their centers have different rules, rituals, and schedules. They have different emphases and characteristics. For example, some almost certainly involve physical discomfort, others most

likely will not. For the sake of this preparation document, we will concentrate on what they hold in common.

Positive potentials of liminality

There are many positive aspects of liminality.

Some of them stem from an increasing capacity for self-observation and self-knowledge. When you are deprived of most external stimuli, it is just you and your own mind. When you are alone with your mind for an extended period of time, it is impossible not to get to know yourself better.

Very quickly you see that your mind wanders. Usually, this is frustrating at first, but according to the technique of mindfulness you are encouraged not to judge this a personal failure but just to notice it as a fact. With repetition, you simply accept that you have a mind that wanders. You practice noticing without judging.

Moreover, you get to know where your mind is wandering. You notice your mind wandering, for instance, to the same fear or fantasy over and over again. Through repetition, you become aware of habitual patterns of thought. By repeatedly letting go of them, you practice detaching yourself from these habitual narratives.

On the other hand, a wound or resentment from the past might come up, revealing where you have some unprocessed emotional pain. The process of confronting this pain often involves intense feelings, which we address in depth in the next section. But by confronting it, by working through it, you free yourself from it and heal.

This allows you to achieve better concentration. By consistently practicing mindfulness, and also by working through the unprocessed emotional pain which is otherwise constantly distracting us, we eventually get better at attending to an object in the present and sticking with it. There are nuanced differences among monastic traditions both in terms of practical instructions and expectations about the results of practice. The general result, however, is that, with practice over time, the mind calms, and slows down.

There are many other fruits of meditation practice alongside the ability to sit in stillness, or concentration. Meditation is like physical exercise; through consistent practice over time you gradually strengthen muscles and train new skills.

One of these skills, to use a Buddhist way of speaking and framing things, is the capacity to be both aware and detached. When we experience desire or pain, our natural habit is to act on it immediately, to react. By sitting a long time, by noticing our uncomfortable sensations and not

reacting to them, we practice non-reaction, or detachment. We practice radical acceptance and compassion for whatever is happening in the moment. In this way, we train ourselves to be a loving witness, and deepen our capacity to act from compassion and awareness rather than from a reactive compulsion.

To put it another way, one fruit of meditation practice is the capacity to be present to our situation without being controlled by it, to participate in the world without being ensnared by it. Our practice helps to free us from compulsions and allows us to be grateful for the things we have.

Unloading

One of the hallmarks of liminal experience facilitated by silence and prolonged meditation is unloading. When you sit in silence, unprocessed emotional pain comes up in the form of charged emotions. Tensions stored in the body and the unconscious mind are healed and released. This is bound to be uncomfortable at first, and can feel like you're backsliding, which is why it is important to be prepared for it, to accept it when it happens. Ajahn Chah said, “if you haven’t wept deeply, you haven’t begun to meditate.” Unloading well is one of the great promises of a prolonged meditation retreat.

This stored tension can come up in different ways. In this section we talk about how it can come up in **physical sensations**, **memories**, and **dreams**. In a later section we talk about how it can come up in projections onto other people and the environment.

Vipassana meditation teacher S. N. Goenka emphasizes that stored tensions can come out in physical sensations. He uses the image of a string held at both ends that’s been twisted and has many coils. The coils represent pain, tension, and trauma stored in the body. You come into meditation all wound up, and practice involves the continuous release of tension, the unwinding of these coils, which we often experience as sensations in our bodies. As you meditate, you may experience an intensification of familiar aches and pains, or very different, disorienting new physical sensations. Your relationship and reaction to pain changes if you can be aware of it without reactivity: this is part of the practice. We will address the topic of physical pain during meditation in more detail in the next section.

Tension might also come up in the form of powerful, emotionally loaded memories. The phrase “unloading the unconscious” comes from the Trappist monk Thomas Keating, who has a lot to say about the details of the process. In *Open Mind, Open Heart*, he writes,

Empirical evidence seems to be growing that consequences of traumatic emotional experiences from earliest childhood are stored in our bodies and

nervous systems in the form of tension, anxiety, and various defense mechanisms... With interior silence and the profound rest that this brings to the whole organism, these emotional blocks begin to soften up, and the natural capacity of the human organism to throw off things that are harmful starts to evacuate them... You don't usually know from what particular source or sources they are coming... Simply putting up with them and not fighting with them is the best way to release them. ("Unloading the Unconscious," *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 1986.)

Unloading in the form of emotionally charged feelings can be challenging for several reasons. For one thing, it can be bewildering. Painful thoughts, regrets, anger, grief, can seem to come out of nowhere and overwhelm you. They don't seem to correlate with anything going on externally at the moment. It can be disorienting just to feel the power of these emotions.

It can also be challenging because you may feel like you are going in the wrong direction. You were aiming for equanimity, and now you are being drawn into a storm of emotions. It can feel like you are doing something wrong, and it can be tempting to abort the process. So it's important to have a perspective that gives you a basic trust in the process, and to understand that, actually, this experience means that you're doing it right. As Keating says, "Emotionally charged thoughts are the chief way that the unconscious has of expelling chunks of emotional pain."

Besides physical pain in the body, or charged thoughts and feelings, you may experience unloading through intense dreams. Of course, it is always natural for the emotional experiences you are processing to come up in your dreams, and because other forms of unloading are going on during the day, intense dreams are even more likely. Moreover, the strengthening of concentration achieved through meditation means you are better able to retrieve and remember dream content, and the simplicity of the monastic environment ensures that you have fewer external stimuli to distract you from it. So if you have intense dreams, know that you are not alone. It is part of the process.

So here are three ways unresolved emotional experiences might come up during prolonged meditation: bodily sensations, intense memories, and powerful dreams. With each of them the main point is: Don't be scared! This is natural. Trust the process. Most people experience different forms of unloading.

It is easier to trust the process if you understand that, in the right environment, unloading is good, and that, on a monastic retreat, you are in the right environment for it. Meditation and meditative environments are specifically designed to promote unloading – the minimal environment, the practice of silence, the daily schedule, and the technique all promote unloading.

Equally important, a meditative environment is designed to promote unloading safely. A prolonged meditation retreat is a container where you can discharge and expel emotional material safely and with support. As we explained above, meditation develops the capacity to surrender, to radically accept, to practice equanimity and compassion. These are precisely the qualities of mind you need to have present to unload safely. Meditation teaches you how to be a loving witness to your own unloading.

In short, in the right environment, unloading is good. And a meditation retreat is a good environment.

Nonetheless, very intense experiences can happen, especially in long retreats, including unproductive ones. Our experience is that people with histories of trauma often have very positive experiences in prolonged meditation retreats. However, some people can get retraumatized in a way that is not productive for their growth. This is why many traditions have ways of screening people to make sure that participants are ready for the challenge of a prolonged meditation retreat.

It is also why we recommend a general warning. If you have a history of trauma, depression, anxiety, or other adverse effects of trauma, and you know that silence and being in your body for extended periods of time triggers you into dysregulation, and that it is difficult for you to reregulate or feel grounded, then a long meditation retreat might not be a supportive practice for you at this time. Similarly, if you are withdrawing from dependency on drugs, prescribed or otherwise, then you might want to wait until you have more time in recovery. There are many other pathways for personal growth that might be very valuable for you, including psychotherapy, working with a trusted mentor or spiritual advisor in your own tradition or community, tai chi, yoga, and other kinds of body-based practices, and many other healing modalities embedded in spiritual traditions. You may also find it valuable to undertake a shorter meditation retreat, or focus on developing your daily meditation practice at home and at your local dharma center or other spiritual community.

It is essential to remember that our meditation practice and our spiritual journey are on the one hand highly personal, individual, and include long periods of solitude, but we also share our journeys with others. We are supported by our traditions, by the generations of teachers and students who have come before us, and by peers and mentors in our communities now. This is one reason why, in Buddhism, the *sangha* or spiritual community is regarded as very precious, one of the three treasures.

As we explore meditation practice, we should seek support and guidance from our own traditions and communities. See the final section of this guide, “Further resources,” for suggested readings

and other resources pertaining to some of the more challenging experiences that can arise during extended meditation retreats.

Physical pain

It surprises some new students that some forms of meditation involve physical pain or discomfort. Students of a ten-day Goenka course, for instance, usually encounter pain. For three designated one-hour periods each day, they are encouraged to find a comfortable position and then to sit for an hour without changing their posture. This is inevitably challenging at first. That is why it is helpful to keep in mind two things.

First, this isn't intended to be sadistic, or cause physical injury. Some level of pain or physical discomfort is common on a long meditation retreat. If you are in serious physical pain, adjust your posture or seating arrangement for better support. Talk to a meditation teacher if you continue to have concerns related to physical pain during meditation.

Second, physical discomfort can serve a purpose. As we discussed above, an important part of meditative practice is learning to sit in and through discomfort. At the most basic physical level, this takes the form of feeling an itch and not scratching it, or feeling a pain and not reacting to it. One of the large goals of meditation is to move from compulsive reaction to thoughtful response. This requires overcoming the compulsion to react, to make a change.

Most people know the first noble truth of Buddhism: that life is suffering. Traditionally, Buddhism distinguishes between two types of suffering. There is necessary suffering, which every living being experiences. And there is unnecessary suffering, which is the suffering that comes from our resistance to the necessary suffering. This is added suffering, suffering in the mind. This is the suffering to which Buddhism promises there can be an end.

Projections onto the mirror of monastic life

We already discussed how, during prolonged meditation, stored tension can come up in the form of physical sensation, memories, and dreams. Another way it can come up is in **projections onto the monastic environment**.

A common concept in psychotherapy is transference and countertransference. Different psychotherapeutic modalities have different ways of explaining and understanding these concepts, but the basic idea is that you bring your past baggage into the relationship with the therapist, and you project your issues onto that relationship.

Obviously, this happens not just in therapy, but in all the relationships in our lives. The emotionally charged programs that we use to survive become habitual, as do the narratives that we use to understand the world. They collapse complexity and we start seeing the world through a narrow lens and behaving rigidly, based on our past experiences and narratives. In short, we project lots of meaning from our past experiences onto the situation in the present.

In traditional psychoanalysis, the therapist was trained not to do much interacting with the client, so that the client could project their issues and experience transference, creating a mirror that would eventually help people see their own projections. By design the monastic environment conforms to this recommendation, creating an almost perfect environment for projection, a spotless mirror.

When attending a retreat in a monastic environment for the first time, we are often surrounded by people who we don't have a history or preexisting relationships with and we have almost no interaction with them. Because we're mostly in silence, we are not getting much feedback about the reality of our projections, and, because in the monastic environment, as we said earlier, there are fewer external stimuli, there is almost nothing to distract us from them. We have tons of time to obsess about and extend our projections. Plus, all of our unloading can add lots of charge to them.

This is a recipe for explosive, highly charged fantasy and projection. We will discuss how these fantasies may be projected onto **the people around you**, into **minor annoyances**, and in **resistance to monastic forms**. These types of projection are very common.

There might be projections onto the people around you. For example, there might be conceptions around the instructors, such as imagined expectations and back stories, or a sense of distrust, where we attach our parental issues and family dynamics to the teacher. Or there might be imagined personalities and back stories about the students around us including those we've had no interaction with. There might even be a sexual or romantic fantasy—this is common enough that you will hear experienced practitioners talk about, for example, the “vipassana crush.”

These common, compulsive fantasies and narratives about other people are often shattered on the last day when you finally hear them speak, or interact with them. You realize that you had an inaccurate sense of who they are, and that they are actually totally different from your projections.

Or there might be minor annoyances, small irritations that become disproportionately charged in the monastic environment. This might mean becoming seriously distracted or agitated by, for example, the breathing or swallowing of someone around you, stomach noises, or creaky doors.

When we are deprived of many other stimuli, our egos can become obsessed by minor annoyances like these.

Finally, our projections can also appear as resistance to ritual forms. As we explained above, many monastic environments use set structures – such as daily schedules, rules around eating, rituals around entering and exiting the meditation hall, etc. – to facilitate the surrender of the ego and the equanimity that are the goals of meditation. These rigidly defined ritual forms function as a further screen we project our issues onto. We resist how they force us to change our habits, to give up some of our autonomy. Our unfamiliarity with them can also bring up feelings of insecurity and inadequacy – “Am I doing it right?”

For example, in some traditions we might be instructed to eat with chopsticks, and we might find ourselves becoming intensely frustrated about it. Of course, it might have to do with the cumbersomeness of using them, or our awkwardness in doing so, but it goes beyond that. It goes to our resistance to feeling controlled, our loss of autonomy, and our sense of incompetence. Then we might project our egoic frustration onto the chopsticks, or other ceremonial forms.

To give another example, some traditions have elaborate forms around the serving of food, a procedure which new meditators are supposed to learn and participate in. On her day on duty, a conscientious new meditator might be on edge, obsessively careful. If she happens to make a mistake serving the food, she might storm out in an emotional fury. Making mistakes in this context, however, is predictable, normal, and entirely acceptable. The meditator is experiencing a disproportionately emotional reaction to the event, which includes emotional material projected from her past.

However, if you're able to see whatever you encounter as a mirror and don't take the bait of the ego to view it as real, then the mirror can show you a great deal about yourself, your egoic attachments, your mental habits and rigidity. The monastic practice has a way of surfacing our deepest struggles and allowing us to see them in the light of our awareness. It is an obstacle course for us: a thoughtfully designed environment that is meant both to challenge us and to be safe. It is a space in which we are helped not only to see our issues but to do so with equanimity, and compassion.

The challenge, of course, is that often, when we are presented with our projections, instead of seeing them as projections, we continue to believe in them and gather evidence to validate them. This can take us into a spiral of fantasy. If you notice yourself getting caught in this kind of dynamic, there are things you can do to help yourself.

Talking to a teacher when you get stuck in compulsive thinking helps you recognize the mirror and not buy into your own narratives and projections. Make it part of your practice to remind

yourself that the environment is designed to be a mirror. Normalize for yourself that the environment is designed to trigger us and that's okay. It might feel crazy at the time, but it's a normal part of the practice and presents an opportunity for learning and growth.

Depending on the structure and guidelines for the retreat, you may also find valuable support by sharing what you are going through with other retreatants. We will discuss this kind of community support in more detail in the next section.

Community and reintegration

Most traditions emphasize the importance for a contemplative practitioner of a community they can relate to and share their practice with. For example, students of Buddhism take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma (the teachings), and the Sangha, which means the spiritual community.

Community gives us perspective and helps us to integrate our experiences. For example, experienced meditators can help you not to get too caught up in unloading, and to understand that your experience is normal. They can act as an experienced guide for the powerful positive experiences or adverse effects common in liminality. In fact, that is one goal of this document.

Usually, retreats are structured to offer additional support of this kind. This is one of the purposes of Dharma talks. At a Goenka Vipassana course, for instance, though you honor noble silence for the first nine days, each evening there is a Dharma talk, during which Goenka helps you to integrate your experience. He describes what you might be experiencing, answers common questions, provides intellectual background and introduces you to the history of his tradition.

Additionally, there are often periods set aside in which students can ask instructors questions. Take advantage of these, especially if you're having intense or bewildering experiences. "Am I the only one this is happening to?" you might wonder, and during the retreat, you're not getting feedback from other people, so you won't know. So it is very valuable to talk with an instructor. An experienced teacher can normalize what you are going through.

Similarly, conversations with other students help you to integrate your experience. Sharing with others helps you to understand and to build meaning around your experience. Sharing in this way can also help you to bring the process of unloading to a close, and prepare you to reenter the world outside the retreat center. It's important for us to have a group of other practitioners to communicate with before we go back home to somewhere where there might be no one who has had similar experiences.

The general point is that after the experience of liminality there's a process of reintegration back into daily life and, hopefully, a new normal. A new normal is more likely if we can reintegrate

with people who have shared experience of the rituals and practices. It helps us digest and integrate our experience and helps the retreat become part of a longer process of spiritual growth in our lives. For this, and many other reasons, we strongly encourage you to explore connecting with a spiritual community in your area if you are not doing so already.

Further resources

i) Exploring the spiritual tradition

There is a great wealth of literature from different spiritual traditions that can provide valuable guidance. We recommend seeking further sources from your own tradition or spiritual community. Here are some sources you may find valuable.

Thomas Keating is one of the modern teachers of Christian mysticism and meditation. He uses the language of the “dark night” and modern psychology to talk about the practice of prolonged prayer and meditation. We recommend his book, *Invitations to Love*.

Richard Rohr is a Franciscan monk and popular modern translator of mysticism. His book *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* can be a helpful orientation to the spiritual path.

Adyashanti is a spiritual teacher in the Zen tradition. His book *The End of Your World* is a resource for people who have had an initial spiritual awakening and want support in understanding how the process continues and unfolds. He talks about the pitfalls and delusions that can follow a period of prolonged meditation.

Rupert Sheldrake has written several books at the intersection of science and spiritual practice and tradition, beginning with *Science and Spiritual Practices*. This book discusses transformative experiences and their effects on our bodies, brains and health. You may also enjoy the sequel: *The ways to go beyond and why they work: Seven Spiritual Practices in a Scientific Age*.

ii) Satori experiences, mystical experiences, and psychic experiences

Many traditions have developed literature around extraordinary experiences resulting from practice including satori experiences, mystical experiences, and psychic experiences.

A satori experience is an experience of inner spaciousness, or inner freedom, beyond personal identity or ego. There is a lot of literature around it in the Zen tradition.

Across traditions, there is a large literature on mystical experiences, which come in many forms. Each tradition has developed its own vocabulary to talk about them. If you have a mystical experience, you shouldn't feel scared or alone in it.

Psychic experiences like prophetic dreaming, and perceptions of the divine are also commonly experienced in monastic life. In the Christian contemplative tradition these are called the fruits and gifts of the spirit. In the Hindu tradition these are called siddhis, or psychic powers. Different traditions have different ways of relating to these experiences.

We won't go further into it here but you should know that these kinds of experiences are common, and that different traditions have developed various approaches to understanding and working with them. If you experience one, don't be scared. Your teachers are prepared to handle them. There is a lot of literature out there to explore, if you're interested, and a spiritual tradition to hold you.

iii) Adverse experiences and trauma-informed meditation

Our experience is that even people with histories of trauma often have very positive experiences in prolonged meditation retreats. However, there are rare cases where people experience intense negative effects, including panic attacks, unloading that continues after the retreat, and personality destabilization. Generally, these adverse experiences affect people who are meditating for more than ten days at a time.

If you're experiencing intense challenges around reintegration after a retreat, we recommend the Cheetah House. The Cheetah House, founded by Dr. Willoughby Britton, a professor at Brown university, is specifically designed to support people who are dealing with adverse effects of prolonged meditation. They provide resources and counseling to people experiencing meditation-related distress.

On their website, The Cheetah House provides an extensive taxonomy of different kinds of meditation-related experiences that are distressing or involve the impairment of functioning, including:

- Vivid imagery
- Derealization
- Breathing changes
- Perceptual hypersensitivity
- Loss of sense of basic self

For the full list and other resources, visit their website: <https://www.cheetahhouse.org/>.

This academic article, “The Varieties of Contemplative Experience,” presents the research by Britton and her research group at Brown University that yielded the taxonomy of 59 kinds of distressing meditation-related experiences:

<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0176239>

There is a research group by the same name, “The Varieties of Contemplative Experience,” based at Brown University, that studies adverse effects of prolonged meditation. Their website includes more academic research articles and news media articles discussing their research:

<https://www.brown.edu/research/labs/britton/research/varieties-contemplative-experience>

Brown University created a “Meditation Safety Toolbox”:

<https://www.brown.edu/research/labs/britton/meditation-safety-toolbox>

If you want to learn more about this, we also recommend the book [*Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness: Practices for Safe and Transformative Healing*](#), by [David Treleaven](#).