

Baggage

Most of us walk around our lives carrying a lot of emotional baggage. Past experiences and old messages shape our beliefs and keep us stuck in the same old patterns. Over time, this baggage ends up costing a lot in terms of time and emotional energy. The only way to change these patterns is to look at them, note where they come from and find a way to let them go. The following meditation exercise is designed to help you unpack your baggage, look at it, and make choices about what you are and are not willing to let go of. If you can, read through this first. Better yet, record it or have someone else record it for you, speaking softly, smoothly and slowly, allowing time to breathe.

Arrange yourself in a comfortable position, either sitting or laying down. Close your eyes and turn your attention towards your breath. Follow your breath as it comes in and goes out of your body. Try this for about 10 – 20 breaths. As you continue to watch your breath, bring your attention to your feet and toes. For the first breath, just notice them. Are they warm? Cold? Just right? After noticing your feet and toes for about 3 breaths, gently relax them. Pay attention to any changes that have happened and then move your awareness up to your calves. Just notice how they feel for a few breaths. Relax your calves. Watch the tension dissolve away.

Move your attention up to your thighs. Notice any tension you are holding in your thighs. Just watch this for a few breaths and then see if you can let any of that go. Keep focusing on your thighs for a few more breaths and imagine the tension melting out of your muscles, dripping down into the ground.

Move your attention up to your buttocks muscles and just notice them. How do they feel? Where do they feel more loose? Where do they feel tight? Observe the patterns of more and less tension for a few breaths. When you are ready, see how much tension you can release from your buttocks muscles.

If you notice that you're feeling drowsy or distracted, bring your attention and focus back to your breath. Now, bring your awareness to your torso -- your belly, chest, and back. Notice which spots feel loose and comfortable and which spots feel tight or painful. See if you can relax your belly. Watch as some of the tension dissipates. Take a few deep breaths. Move your awareness to your chest and see what you can release from your chest. Now, move your awareness to your back and gently release any tension you are holding there. Keep breathing. Release the remaining tension on your out-breath.

Move your attention up to your neck and shoulders. See if you can let the tension melt away and drip down your arms, picking up whatever tension you may have in your arms along the way. Let that tension drip down the tips of your fingers and into the ground beneath the floor.

Finally, relax your face, your skull, and last of all, your brain. Take in another deep breath. On the exhale, release any remaining tension you may be holding.

Now, you should be ready to go. We're starting at the bottom of a steep path that leads up to a mountain peak. This is the old school style of virtual reality. You get to choose your scenery and all the other sensory stimuli. This is like a mini vacation so go for something wonderful.

Your backpack is waiting for you at the trailhead. Hoist it up on your shoulders and notice how heavy it feels. As you walk up the path, notice what surrounds you. Are you in a forest? Near the ocean? In a desert? Is it sunny? Cloudy? Rainy? Snowy? What do you hear? The sound of your shoes

crunching on the path? Birds? Insects? The wind blowing? Ocean waves crashing onto the shore beneath you?

Remember to breathe and take in what you are seeing, smelling and feeling as you continue up the path.

As the path gets steeper, your backpack is getting really, really heavy. Now is a great time to stop, unhoist your backpack and look inside. It's filled with old habits of the heart: patterned ways in which you have defined yourself, others and the world. Pull out the old beliefs and messages that you shoved in at the last moment. These are the old messages and beliefs that you are not quite so attached to. They no longer really fit with how you feel about yourself and/or the world, but you tend bring them along with you out of habit. You get to decide which of these messages and beliefs you want to keep and which you want to release. When you're done, put your backpack back on and continue up the path. Notice the weight of your backpack. If you let go of a lot of stuff, it should feel lighter.

Continue walking up the path. Notice how the terrain changes as your elevation increases. After a few moments, bring your awareness to your back and shoulders. Feel how heavy your backpack is. If you're ready, take it off and look at the beliefs you carry about how you or others should be and what you or they should be doing. Because these messages contain an implicit or explicit "should," they make it hard to accept yourself as you are and end up being a pretty heavy burden. Look at them. Are there any that you no longer care about or that no longer serve you? (For example, do you really care if you or your partner wears white after Labor Day? Did you learn somewhere that you should always be polite, even when someone offends you or that you should never say, "No," even when you don't want what someone is offering? Do you think your partner should lift weights so she/he looks better attached to your arm?) Which of these "shoulds" or rules are you willing to let go, or at least tone down? If there are rules that you think are helpful (I.E. don't kill people, not even your neighbor who woke you up this morning at 3:00 am to a BG's song), carefully put it or them back in the bag. The very fact that you looked at them will make them a little lighter.

Continue hiking up the path. Again, focus on the scenery as you continue up the mountain. Notice how the scenery changes with elevation. Notice also that your pack is still feeling really heavy and exhausting and that the trail ahead of you is really, really steep. It's time to dig through your backpack again. What else can you let go of? Are you holding onto anger about something that happened in the past, whether it was earlier in the day or years ago? Resentment is heavy. Pull out each incident and look at it. Do you think that you might, for example, be willing to let go of the fact that when you were 5, your brother ate all the Fritos and left you holding the bag? What about the fact that you got fired for something that wasn't your fault at your last job? Self anger can be even heavier. What would happen if you forgave yourself for even one or two mistakes you made? Once you've sorted through all the stuff that you're angry about and have chosen what to let go of and what you still want to ruminate on, repack your gear, hoist your backpack back on your shoulders and continue hiking up the path.

Again, now that you are walking, notice the sounds that are around you. Are there birds or chipmonks chirping? Insects humming? Bears growling? What sorts of plants and rock formations are you seeing? How much has the temperature dropped as you've risen in elevation? We're on a pretty flat part of the trail, so enjoy the walk! Bring your awareness back to your breath for a few moments as you continue walking up the trail.

Even though your backpack probably doesn't feel all that heavy right now, it's a good idea to take it off and sort through the old negative messages you have about yourself because we're almost to the top and the last stretch of the trail is almost vertical. As you sort through the old messages or definitions you hear at the bottom of the pack, notice how you feel. You might hear words like "stupid," "loser," "fat," "dorky," "slut," or any other words that make you feel less than. It's really important to let go of these old messages. They are toxic and make it almost impossible for you to heal and live into your unlimited potential. These words may purport to describe how you look or behavior you have engaged in, but they are not who you are. And many of them are simply not true. Even if you consistently lose at poker, get dumped by girlfriends and/or boyfriends and have a hard time keeping a job, you are not a loser. You may be someone who has experience at losing. Welcome to the club. Most of us, truth be told, lose a lot. The only way not to lose is to not take risks. Why not acknowledge your risk taking and let it go? The bottom line is that losing is something you do, it's not who you are.

Once you have sorted through your old messages, hoist up your backpack and put it on. It's time to scramble up to the top. Go slow. Be careful where you put your feet and hold on to the rocks or strong branches with your hands. You can do this because you can do anything in your mind. Keep breathing. Just a few more feet... you're almost there. Now, pull yourself up and over the top. You're at a clearing. You can see for miles and miles. It's beautiful. Spend a few moments just looking at the view. When you are ready, hold that small part of you that feels the sting of those words and harsh expectations you've been sorting through with compassion. Imagine forgiving yourself and others for not living up to impossible and unrealistic standards. See if you can, in this moment, love yourself absolutely and completely. If you can't do this, imagine what it might feel like to be loved absolutely and completely. Sit in this feeling for a few moments. When you're ready, slowly open your eyes and come back to the actual time space continuum you were in before taking the trip.

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