

A Journey for Modern Life

The scale of modern life is unprecedented. Economies of production convert the world's resources into goods available throughout the globe. Advances in health care keep us living longer and healthier. Technology allows us to communicate with virtually anyone, anywhere. We have instant access to more information and entertainment than we could ever consume, and our knowledge of the universe, from the cosmos to the atom, is deeper and more widely available than ever before.

At the scale of the individual, however, the quality of our inner lives is often left unattended. The pressures of life, both inner and outer, can be intense, and technology and discovery do little to tame the emotions that disturb our inner state and upset our personal lives. The challenge is to thrive in the modern world while also cultivating a deep sense of inner well-being and calm.

The answer to this challenge is to unfold an inner dimension to our lives. This dimension does not look to an outside god or savior. Instead, it is an unfolding that happens within us, that connects us to a deeper aspect of our minds. Ordinary life is full of inner movement that keeps us distracted and locked in a whirlwind of activity. The dimension we are describing takes us beyond the surface of this inner movement to find a deeper source of energy and well-being.

We can illustrate this by analogy to the layers of the ocean. The surface of the ocean is active, influenced by external events such as weather and tides. But as the ocean deepens, it becomes stiller and less affected by what happens on the surface. It has a strong, quiet steadiness that gives the whole body of water stability.

Our minds are similar. On the surface, we tend to move frenetically, jumping from this to that, and we are highly reactive to outer events. The goal of the inner journey we are describing is to find a deeper dimension within our minds, one that takes us beyond the surface agitation. This makes the mind calmer and stronger and creates a backdrop from which other qualities, such as serenity, insight, and concern for others, can emerge.

Mythologist Joseph Campbell labeled the process of unfolding this inner dimension the hero's journey. From the yarns of African witch doctors to the parables of Eastern mystics to the tales of Eskimo tribes, Campbell saw a common metaphor for the inner journey. He described the hero as "the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations," whose "visions, ideas, and inspirations come pristine from the primary springs of human life and thought," and who, finally, "is to return then to us, transfigured, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed."¹ This is not a physical journey. It is not somewhere we go. It is an inner journey in which each of us is the hero.

Meditation training is a way to make this journey. It is a body of insight, paired with a collection of methods for disciplining and training the mind. It has a philosophical sophistication that makes it well suited to modern life—it values reason and critical inquiry, is not beholden to dogma, and allows us to embrace technology and science without being defined by them. Its practices are not about religion, worship, or following rules. Rather, they are a means to liberate our capacity for serenity, love, joy, and insight, to give expression to who we are, and to unlock our capacity to become a strong, positive force in the world.

Engaging meditation training calls for four types of practice: meditation, balance, compassion, and insight.

- Meditation encompasses a rich collection of practices for developing the mind. Integrating meditation into our lives is the foundation for our journey.
- Balance means gaining control over the emotional swings and extremes that cause agitation. Our emotions have an enormous effect on our experience, often impeding our inner growth. Gaining control over our emotions can create a dramatic shift in our well-being.
- Compassion calls for deepening our sensitivity and concern for others. We learn the power of selfless action to unleash a wave of positive energy that infuses all we do.
- Insight provides the wisdom that expands our awareness and breaks us free from the limited perspective, dogma and conventions that hold us back.

Collectively, these practices comprise the path of the hero. They are the tools that launch us on a lifelong journey of growth, discovery, and new experiences, and they are a means by which, in the midst of modern life, we can each discover the hero's journey for ourselves.

¹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (New York: Bollinger Foundation, 1949), 19-20.