

R.E.S.T.: A Practice for the Tired & Weary

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In this article I explore how systems of capitalism and colonialism—the larger anti-Black world—have conditioned modern mindfulness meditation to be unattractive for Black contemplatives (Sharpe, 2016). I describe the Four Pillars of R.E.S.T. as a contemplative offering that is free of colonial influence. R.E.S.T. is a contemplative practice, intended to be practical and accessible for Black folks who are fatigued from America’s centuries-old repeated attempts to break our bodies and spirits. The intention of R.E.S.T. is to offer Black people a contemplative path to liberation that not only empowers us to remain resilient in the face of overt forms of injustice, but also acknowledges our exhaustion and affirms our need to rest. R.E.S.T. is an alternative to mainstream mindfulness meditation that so often portrays suffering as an outcome of a personal inability to pay attention properly, completely ignoring the fundamental integration of life, where both the social and the personal are constantly interacting and influencing each other.

Introduction to R.E.S.T.

When I first started practicing mindfulness, like many people, I attended lots of meditation retreats and trainings. I was told by other practitioners that retreats were opportunities to step away from daily life and to really focus on deepening one’s practice. So that’s what I set off to do. Coming from the Black Church tradition, I was unfamiliar with the retreat formalities and practices, in particular, the practices of noble silence, eye gazing, and attention training.

Traditionally, noble silence is the practice of being aware of unnecessary physical and verbal expressions, as a way of establishing awareness of our inner life and our surroundings. Sister Chân Diệu Nghiêm, student of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, describes noble silence this

way: Noble silence does not mean that we are not allowed to talk. It means that we don't have to talk, we have no obligation to talk during that period of the day or night. And she also states, inner silence makes us available for ourselves, our loved ones, and the Wonders of Life (Chân Diệu Nghiêâm, 2019).

Simply speaking, eye-gazing is a contemplative practice that involves two people standing or sitting closely, and looking into each other's eyes for a period of time to build connection beyond assumptions. In Valin S. Jordan's words, eye-gazing is a powerful act that opens up the terrain of possibility for connection; its realization as a reflective, introspective, and mindful practice helps to situate the reality of connection with the Other. What is learned through eye-gazing is the ability to erase or remove the ever-present separations that exist between us (Jordan, 2018).

Attention is the process of deliberately focusing one's energy on a particular object in their experience. The deliberate nature of turning attention towards experience is to eventually train the mind to refrain from being captivated by mental proliferations and desires. The mind's tendency is to move toward complication, to be endlessly attracted to anything other than simplicity. So the first step in meditation is putting attention onto something simple: the sensations within the body or the physicality of being in the body (Pasanno, 2015). When the mind wanders or becomes distracted, the goal is to reestablish the attention, by focusing the attention once again on an object of the present moment. This is a process that takes time and effort, and eventually, the muscle to establish and develop stability of awareness will allow you to look at thoughts, emotions, and even physical pain without wavering (Rinpoche, 2009).

Over time, I really began to appreciate the depth of noble silence when practiced, not as a restriction or limitation, but as an opportunity for building intimacy with myself and my surroundings. My experiences with noble silence on meditation retreats have often felt very isolating and even violent at times. Being one of five Black people on retreats of 60 – 100 participants and seeing people put their heads down when I walked by them in the name of noble silence often made me feel deval-

ued in my Black body and unseen in the space. Experiencing this for seven straight days on a retreat is very fatiguing.

It is my personal belief that eye-gazing can serve as a powerful way of diminishing the illusion of self and others. But when this practice is taught without cultural and trauma sensitivity, many people walk away feeling less seen, harmed, and fatigued. Trauma research shows that direct eye contact, irrespective of the emotional facial expression displayed, may be a signal of threat under some social contexts or in populations that experienced negative events accompanied by eye contact (Steuwe et al., 2012).

On retreats, I also noticed how my body responded to guided meditation instructions that required focused attention on a particular object of experience for a sustained time period. Although my body would signal signs of fatigue and overwhelm, I would override my responses to remain an active participant in the retreat. Not to mention that body movement was an unspoken “no-no” that everyone adhered to unless it was a specific practice that required movement such as yoga or a walking meditation.

In the meantime, I recognized that I was going to have to figure out another way to care for myself while on retreats in order to prevent exhaustion. I decided to listen to my body. Instead of pushing through the fatigue of having to focus for long periods, I allowed my attention to relax and to rest naturally. I explored what it would be like to rest my attention, without any goal in mind. Thinking and emotions would continue to come and go, however, my experience was held within a state of effortless awareness. I was attentive and engaged, but my path to this sense of expansiveness was letting go of any formal meditation structure and to rest. This was a transformative point in my meditation path and also deeply affirmative. At the time I had no idea that resting and meditating could co-exist. And I began to think about all of the other Black people who might have also encountered some of the same barriers that I ran up against on retreats. I couldn't have been the only Black person who had encountered these obstacles on the path.

I don't want any Black person to ever feel defeated when trying to meditate. Now I understand that culture, social inequities, and trauma

need to be included in the topic of meditation if we really want meditation to be inclusive. The Four Pillars of R.E.S.T. are four possible doorways for Black people to meditate without the stress of adapting the secularized, Europeanized presentation of mindfulness. The Four Pillars of R.E.S.T. are:

- R: Relax the Attention
- E: Exhale All Striving
- S: Sense the Silence
- T: Tune in to Awareness

I have intentionally created this practice for Black folks who want a break from the hands of capitalism and whiteness. Black people need a practice that considers our social exhaustion and realities. R.E.S.T. is for Black people who are simply “sick and tired of being sick and tired” like Fannie Lou Hamer.

Methodology

There is an extensive body of work that highlights mindfulness and its benefits. Results show that mindfulness training significantly improves visuo-spatial processing, working memory, and executive functioning (Zeidan et al., 2010). It is also well known through the increased interest and offerings of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction programs that mindfulness can have a beneficial effect on anxiety symptoms in generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and may also improve stress reactivity and coping skills (Hoge et al., 2013).

Through the work of Black scholars such as Mary-Frances Winters, the author of *Black Fatigue: How Racism Erodes the Mind, Body, and Spirit* and Joy DeGruy, the author of *Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*, more evidence is showing the residual impacts of intergenerational systemic trauma on the Black body and mind. In David A. Treleaven’s book *Trauma Sensitive Mindfulness: Practices for Safe & Transformative Healing* and Bessel van der Kolk’s book *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, their trauma informed lenses to mindfulness reveal that “Mindfulness has been shown to have a positive effect on numer-

ous psychiatric, psychosomatic, and stress-related symptoms, including depression and chronic pain” (van der Kolk, 2015).

Despite the depth of study happening in the field of mindfulness at large, and the information that has been revealed by Black scholars on the effects of intergenerational trauma and Black people, very few studies have emerged that actively explore the intersection of non-dual mindfulness practices and the impact of White supremacy and capitalism on Black people who practice meditation. I am interested in exploring whether the Four Pillars of R.E.S.T. are a more accessible, non-dual, and trauma-sensitive approach to meditation for Black people impacted by these systems of oppression.

My research and reflections are heavily influenced by spiritual teachings from both the classical nondual meditation traditions of India and Tibet, Advaita, and Dzogchen. The teachings of Tibetan Buddhist minister and author Lama Rod Owens have profoundly informed my understanding of “self-care” and “compassion” as liberatory practices for Black people. Cedric Robinson and Saidiya Hartman of the Black radical tradition have inspired my outlook on the historical legacy of resistance against systems of colonialism, capitalism, and slavery by Black people. The writings of Dr. Ashon Crawley challenge me to consider how Black sociality is already pregnant with possibilities, alternatives, and radical ways of living in the world we wish to inhabit. The ministry of the Nap Ministry and the Nap Bishop Tricia Hersey, reminds me to look deeply into the records and histories of Black people creatively embodying rest as protest against the brutal systems of white supremacy and capitalism. More recently, the intersectional work of Dr. Sará King’s framework, the Science of Social Justice, has helped me to consider that the way people who have experienced intergenerational oppression make meaning and sense out of the world is constantly being shaped by these external forces of systemic oppression (King, 2021).

The absence of theory and reliable meditation practices centered around the historical experiences of Black people and trauma-informed nondual meditation led me to create a 5-week online course called R.E.S.T.: A Practice for the Tired & Weary. This course offered an expe-

riential learning environment for people who are worn out by systemic oppression and are in search of a method of meditating that is grounded in resting in awareness instead of concentration. The Four Pillars of R.E.S.T. (see above) are the essential components of the practice.

In 2021, close to 100 people participated in the class. Pre-surveys and post surveys were offered to each participant of the course. To obtain a more focused understanding of the experiences of Black people in the course, the author offered an additional online post-survey to 10 participants who identified as Black or African American. The survey process involved voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality.

The survey featured close-ended “yes” or “no” questions, such as: “Capitalism & White Supremacy are two systemic structures that have been sources of exhaustion and trauma in my life.” Additionally, the survey included short open-ended questions that inquired about the impact of the R.E.S.T course on the participants. One hundred percent of the Black participants who received the survey completed it. The results of the survey indicate that nearly all of the participants feel that systemic structures such as capitalism and White supremacy have been sources of exhaustion and trauma, and 80% felt that the R.E.S.T. practices were beneficial tools in addressing the symptoms of exhaustion and trauma.

There are some limitations to this data, in that it only features a small sample of participants, all of whom were particularly interested in this particular method of meditation. However, as the sample includes responses from Black participants, one can draw some initial conclusions about Black individuals who are open to exploring meditation practices as a strategy for addressing the impacts of trauma and exhaustion.

Mindfulness in Buddhism

One major misconception of contemplative practice is that contemplation is solely for cultivating a relationship with oneself. However, there is so much more to contemplation other than the inward exploration of self. The contemplative journey is a journey of wonder and curiosity into

the inherent interconnection of self, other, and the world. In contemplation, we never arrive at a fixed answer about humanity or creation, but it is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. And in this place of interest, there is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent, and infinitely abundant source (Ort, 2018).

As a Black contemplative practitioner and teacher, I consider mindfulness, when explored in its vast variations as found in its Buddhist origins, as a potential path for Black people. It is my experience that mindfulness can cultivate resilience and also awaken the reality of interconnection while maintaining our intimacy with our inherent goodness. Despite the racial inequities and systemic oppression that we live in, I believe that mindfulness can support our ability to feel our inherent belonging.

Although, I am not comfortable with recommending the secularized model of mindfulness to Black people, unless shared in conjunction with other contemplative practices (I will elaborate more about this in the upcoming sections).

The original Pali term *sati* is where the word mindfulness derives its origins. Throughout Buddhist discourses, the word *sati* has held several meanings, depending on the context in which it is used. For four centuries, the Buddhist scriptures were preserved and transmitted orally from one generation of reciters to the next (Bodhi, 2011). In the Nikayas, *sati* is addressed as a faculty of remembering or recollecting—the monk recollects that Dhamma (teaching) and thinks it over. The Satipatthana Sutra says that mindfulness is established as a stance of observation or watchfulness towards one's experience. You also find mindfulness considered to have ethical and altruistic roles as found in the Loving Kindness Sutra:

With loving-kindness for the whole world should one cultivate a boundless heart, Above, below, and all around without obstruction, without hate and without ill-will. Standing or walking, sitting or lying down, Whenever one is awake, may one stay with this recollection. (Fronsdal, n.d.)

After reviewing several of the Buddha's discourses on mindfulness, it is clearly evident that mindfulness was never limited or intended to be limited to one meaning or application. There is profound plurality in the Buddha's application of mindfulness. Mindfulness embodies interoceptive qualities such as activeness and insight, but also more engaged qualities such as compassion and kindness. The spirit of mindfulness is always in service of seeing through all forms of ignorance and social systems that create and support the delusion of separation between self and the world.

Decolonizing Awareness

Modernity and colonialism are two forces that have shaped mindfulness as we know it today in America. Mindfulness is depicted to be hyper-centered around the individual and the practitioner's personal well-being. This non-traditional interpretation of mindfulness is filled with gestures of erasure and repositioning values that are not indigenious to mindfulness Buddhist literature. The mainstream westernized illustration of mindfulness suggests that personal happiness and success are the key benefits of mindfulness. The way to acquire these perks is through disciplining the mind to pay attention. The marked language of being mindful is *being in the present moment*. Indirectly, this voices the idea that in order to live mindfully, a person must have the capacity to continuously focus their attention on what's happening.

The misrepresentation and *watering down* of mindfulness to attention training is a colonial viewpoint—a western conceptualization of mindfulness. Attention is positioned and the individual is the sole benefactor of this controlled mind. This colonial marketing strategy and teaching philosophy has given *paying attention in the present moment* authority over all other culturally relevant pathways to cultivating mindfulness. In marketing, this singling out of one particle element of a larger framework is called product positioning, which refers to how a brand wants to be perceived in the minds of customers relative to competing brands. The objective of a positioning strategy is to establish a single defining characteristic of a brand in the mind of the consumer (Indeed Editorial Team, 2021).

Developing the energy to pay attention does have significant value for many practitioners; however, it is one pedagogy within a larger context of mindfulness that can be taught alongside or in conjunction with other pathways of practice. Colonialism prides itself off of removing diversity, and establishing one singular approach, commonly known as universalism. In the pioneering book *Black & Buddhist*, Sebene Selassie expresses that this is a postmodern critique of the ideas central to the European Enlightenment project, especially its universalist assumptions of objectivity, reason, progress, and truth (Steuwe et al., 2012).

In Black American culture, diversity and multiplicity are central tenets of our way of living. There is not one expression of Blackness, even though White America has attempted to define and contain us through centuries of systemic injustice. We define ourselves through our creative evolutionary ways of retaining joy and metabolizing suffering. We express this resilience in hip-hop, jazz, laughing, crying, storytelling, writing, dancing, and the list goes on and on. For me, Blackness is about respect and spaciousness. Spaciousness is awareness without competition between the uniqueness and multiplicity of culture. Respect is how we remain committed to compassionately orienting ourselves towards complexity, rather than turning away from it. So when we meditate, we are not only seeking self-liberation, but liberation for all people who find refuge in their Blackness, however they define it.

Laying Down the Intentions

The intention of R.E.S.T. is to provide a decolonized awareness practice that is culturally appropriate for Black people. In this framework, each pillar of R.E.S.T. serves as a guide post to experience resting and being aware. Reclaiming agency of the attention is a natural and spontaneous outcome of the R.E.S.T. practice, instead of the means to rest.

Within the R.E.S.T. model, we set aside all notions of controlling and attending, and we ground ourselves in resting. The profound recognition of the spaciousness of the mind found in simply relaxing our attention is healing. In this space, we feel safe and we can free ourselves from the mental prisons inculcated by a racist society and culture (Yेतunde et al., 2020). A relaxed, open awareness orients us to resolve the

disconnect in ourselves that disables us to see the suffering and disconnect that we have with others as well (Canmore Theravada Buddhist Community, 2021). There is no need to subdue thoughts or any mental/emotional appearances, they are welcomed without attachment or rejection. The arising of mental phenomena are like a variety of flowers in a wild field, each flower revealing the beauty of the garden. If the attention happens to move around, the invitation is to recognize the movement, relax the attention in awareness, and feel the freedom and spaciousness of the mind.

From the perspective of R.E.S.T. our inner life is clearly seen and held, as we practice letting reactions of greed and hatred dissolve in the presence of awareness. Rather than replicating their energies with attempting to get rid of them, we practice non-aggression and hold them with compassionate attention. As we rest more, it becomes clearer that awareness is never disturbed or limited by the movement of our attention.

R.E.S.T. is a practice of letting everything be without striving. Letting everything be invites us into a more relaxed relationship with our experience. To trust life and to make room for our deepest hopes for ourselves and our world (Yetunde et al., 2020). Being in a more relaxed relationship with ourselves reorients a compassionate view of the world as well. This reorientation is important because it positions us to embody the awareness that the heart of contemplative practices is about experiencing what is happening and understanding that we can survive the experience if we can connect to the spaciousness that is both in and around our experiences.

Capitalism & Mindfulness

Since 1619, when the first enslaved Africans arrived in North America, the use of African bodies for the purpose of economic development has been central to the American consciousness. And, while slavery is often considered to be primarily concerning imperialism and economic surplus, we also must acknowledge that land and capital were both useless unless *labor* could be demanded (Williams, 1994). Labor, or in this context forced working without any concern for the body, soul, and

health of the worker, is directly compounded on the idea of sacrificing human life to the deity of increased production. In this section, I am referring to this process of using human bodies for the sole purpose of profit, production, or reward, as capitalism.

Even though slavery was eventually abolished, its unmoral and unethical dimensions, and prejudices towards Black bodies are very alive in our modern work force culture. Today, there are no longer slave owners and enslaved workers, but we have the big corporations and private companies who control how much value the workers' time and energy is worth, generally leaving the worker underpaid for their labor. We clock in and out at a certain time; we report to our bosses; if we are late to work we are penalized, but arriving early and staying late is a rite of passage that we are expected to endure if we want to keep our job. The reality is that Black people leave organizations because of the fatigue associated with needing to constantly prove themselves and not being acknowledged for their contributions (Winters, 2020).

We basically live in a society where the social imagination states that dignity and worth is connected to our ability to perform and produce. But when do we rest? When do we take time to feel and to restore ourselves? How does capitalism contribute to fatigue and does capitalism influence how we relate to our minds, even during meditation?

With the mainstream mindfulness industry portraying mindfulness as a strategy for self-improvement and reducing stress, it is clear why many people find meditation to be stressful. The marketing of mindfulness is confusing and people are connecting meditation with either fixing their problems or enhancing their happiness rather than developing a full recognition that the internal and external phenomena we experience as human beings are intimately tied to how society relates to us, as racialized, gendered, economic beings (Liu, 2013).

According to Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), mindfulness is the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally. Zinn's definition of mindfulness also creates the idea that awareness is the outcome of our personal effort. Once again, positioning the practitioner's spiritual progress as something to be earned. However,

as Longchenpa beautifully says in *You Are the Eyes of the World*, awareness is not a contrived outcome that needs to be purified, but awareness is naturally nonjudgmental and free from all discursiveness. Serene and insubstantial, like the sky (Lipman & Peterson, 2011).

For many Black practitioners who are already exhausted from the inequities of capitalism, the modern application of mindfulness is just an extension of the already burdensome structure that is the cause of so much suffering. Instead of our bodies being put to work in order to produce, our attention is put to work. In this framework, the capacity to pay attention determines how mindful we are.

R.E.S.T. is an act of refusal and care for many Black people. It's not only a spiritual practice but it is also a protest against capitalism, a system whose DNA can't be separated from its origins, American slavery. As Rev. angel Kyodo williams says, as human beings that believe in our own humanity, it's our responsibility to resolve the disconnect within ourselves, that disables us from seeing the suffering and disconnect that we have with others (Canmore Theravada Buddhist Community, 2021). And for us, Black folks having to always pay attention, "being fully efficient, always doing what we're told, always doing what we're programmed, is not always the most human thing. Sometimes it's disobeying, sometimes it's saying, o, I'm not gonna do this" (Kantayya, 2020, 1:22:00).

The R.E.S.T. model provides practical steps back to our fundamental state of balance and ease. We no longer have to override our nervous systems' instinctual responses to rest and relax when we are feeling overwhelmed and overworked. When we ignore our basic need to rest from all forms of laboring, whether physical or psychological, we shut ourselves off from the inherent wisdom of our bodies, and the feedback that it is giving us in relation to our health. Working against ourselves without knowing it, we can burn out the balancing mechanisms of our autonomic nervous system, and develop numerous and varied emotional and physical symptoms (Canali, 2006, p. 1). Our attention is released from its duties of focusing and being on guard, finding itself resting in an effortless relaxed state of awareness. Our stress levels begin to decrease in this relaxed presence and the parasympathetic nervous system conserves energy and enables us to rest.

“Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired”

Practicing mindfulness is nothing new for Black folks. As Black Buddhist practitioner and teacher Mama Ayesha Ali always says, “we’ve been practicing mindfulness (internally and externally) since 1619.” Internally, we were aware of the deep brokenheartedness that we felt in our hearts and bodies as we were stolen from our land, water, family, and culture through the transatlantic slave trade. And externally, for millennia, celestial wayfinding knowledge—navigating by observing the stars and other night sky patterns—passed from generation to generation, guided us to the north to freedom (West, 2018). And today, Black folks are mindful not necessarily out of choice, but because a moment of mindlessness could determine life or death.

For many Black people, being attentive and responsive has been key to our survival and wellbeing as we navigate living in a racially violent society that has never honored nor intended to honor our existence. So for us Black folks, considering the transhistorical political, economic, and social conditions that shape our reality, the modern extraction of mindfulness isn’t enough. A contemplative practice should invite us to both pay attention and heal; we are tired. Nakeia Homer says it well: you are not lazy, unmotivated, or stuck. After years of living your life in survival mode, you are exhausted. There is a difference (Homer, 2021).

The practice of R.E.S.T. centers effortless abiding as a direct path to liberation. To ask us to pay more attention is like inviting someone who is crying to stop crying and to focus on where it hurts; it’s deeply traumatizing. And to ask us to pay attention without voicing our grief and social realities, or what Sensei Zenju Earthlyn Manuel calls the fire of our existence, is a form of erasure and it is deeply exhausting (Gleig, 2021). We are experiencing what author Mary-Frances Winters, in her book *Black Fatigue: How Racism Erodes the Mind, Body, and Spirit*, calls *Black Fatigue*. Winters says Black Fatigue is about the fatigue that comes from the pain and anguish of living with racism every single day of your life. It is about being fatigued by those who are surprised and express outrage (with no action) that such inequities still exist. It is about the constant fatigue of not knowing whether you or a loved one will come home alive. It is about enduring the ravages of intergenerational racism (Winters, 2020).

R.E.S.T. is not meant to be in competition with any other contemplative practice. The beauty of R.E.S.T. is that it can serve as a complementary practice to any other healing practices. We need practices that take into consideration the race-based inequities, the race-based violence in our country, and the data that shows how centuries-old racist systems lead to intergenerational stress and trauma, increasing inherited health disparities that manifest as generations of oppressively inequitable life experiences and outcomes for Black people (Winters, 2020). I understand that these systematic causes and conditions deeply influence how Black people experience meditation. I understand how identities and other cultural factors of Black life create a uniquely complex set of realities that the mainstream modern mindfulness movement chooses to tiptoe around.

For some Black people, the offering to relax the attention and exhale all striving gives us a break from holding the constant emotional labor required of Black people in America today. In this openness we may experience a releasing of subtle latent tensions in the body and mind. When this energy is released and allowed to naturally arise in a container of compassionate awareness, we feel safe and rested. This empowers our nervous system to re-channel that energy into an active response, so then the body has a response of power of its own capacity to regulate, and the person comes out of this shutdown state into a process in which they re-own their own vital energy (Yalom & Yalom, 2010).

A Guided Practice-R.E.S.T.

In conclusion, I'd like to offer instructions for a short guided R.E.S.T. practice.

1. Find a comfortable posture of your choice. This could be a sitting posture, standing, or lying down.
2. If you choose to keep your eyes open, let your gaze rest, lowered on a point in front of you. If you choose to keep your eyes closed, rest your eyelids comfortably.
3. Set your intention toward relaxing and effortlessness.

4. Whenever you notice yourself shifting into “doing” or “thinking,” simply return back to your original intention, and begin again.
5. Relax your attention. Release any fixation that you might have on any object. Be as ordinary and natural as possible. If you notice that your attention becomes fixated or distracted, simply relax.
6. Exhale all striving. Empty yourself of any effort toward achieving a particular outcome or result. Remain open and accepting to the present moment. Let your experience be as it is.
7. Sense the silence. Surrender all attachment to what you notice, and feel the intuitive sense of silence within you. Be aware of the silence and feel the vastness of the silence.
8. Tune in to awareness. Recognize that you are naturally aware, and you are conscious of this awareness. Trust this effortless knowing and the silence. There’s nothing to do, and nowhere to go. Just rest.
9. When you are ready to end the practice, gently bring your attention to your surroundings and invite simple movements to your body.

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