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Self-Care Matters: Cultivating Practices as Students and Teachers

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Every week during my online course I assign a body-oriented spiritual practice that overlaps with what is often called “self-care.” I sometimes hesitate to use “self-care” as a descriptor because it has been so overused in some contexts that it has become a cliché catchphrase. Still, I recognize the need to take care of ourselves so that we can be of benefit to others.

Resistance to meeting a need comes up regularly, too. A student wrote recently about her frustration at engaging a practice. “I don’t have time for this,” she poured out. “I have too many things to do.” I have compassion for such honesty. Even when the practice fulfills a class requirement, it can still be hard to do! We are often more attentive to checking items off our list, and just plowing through or getting on with it.

Students and teachers alike are embedded in family and institutional systems that require attention and draw on our energy in differing ways. Where we can exercise control, it is helpful to do so. Hewing toward dutiful diligence comes with a price. The anger of the elder brother in the Lukan parable of the man and his two sons is a flashing signal warning us to pay attention to the need for spiritual and emotional sustenance while fulfilling daily tasks. Anger wakes us up and calls for beneficial action. Otherwise, it can morph into bitter resentment.

A graduate school classmate once commented about our different approaches to work-life balance, as we encouraged one another through the writing of dissertations. “You work during the week and take the weekends off. I work on the weekends and take the week off!” The statement was a humorous exaggeration, even as it conveyed a point. We work within the bounds of our personalities, histories, and situations. In eastern philosophical systems, the

term *vasana* refers to habitual tendencies and subtle inclinations imprinted in the mind that inform our desires and wants. Habit energy can carve deep ruts and fuel regularized healthy practice. We can choose its direction.

Two years into a global pandemic, self-care is now more important than ever. Through it all, I have kept up whatever practices I could. When gyms closed, I put on my walking shoes and charted a three-mile course through several neighborhoods that allowed for an hour of outdoor activity. I bought a jacket that could help me keep going during winter's freezing temperatures. When the local YMCA reopened, I resumed lap swimming. I am so committed to the practice that I hovered by the computer to reserve daily timed slots. I waited (sometimes not so) patiently at the facility to snag a slot left open by someone who did not show up.

I have been attentive to exercise as a caring practice for years. During the pandemic, I have become vigilant because I know this about myself: I cannot focus and function well without releasing the anxiety and stress that resides in my body. I also begin each day with the rituals of contemplative silence and a few yoga poses. I even do the "chair pose," a form of a standing squat, while heating the milk for my morning coffee. Such micro practices mirror a course exercise in which I ask students to be on the lookout for their own workable options. While the learning from practice is completion graded (meaning that students get credit for sharing), I always read the reflections with enthusiasm. I am curious to participate in their discoveries about self/spiritual care. I also glean tips for my own practice.

Recently, a colleague remarked that she wanted to do better at self-care. "You are very good about it," she said somewhat enviously about my daily regimen. "I cannot not do it," I acknowledged. The habit energy creates its own momentum with noticeable benefits. A course participant shared a similar sentiment regarding how the weekly class spiritual/self-care practices were having an effect: "My wife noticed a difference in my mood, and said 'Whatever you're doing, keep at it!'"

Through sustained caring practice, we recognize how restored of energy our body feels, and how much better we are at honoring our own and others' emotional and relational boundaries. Living too dutifully with the burden of responsibilities can leave us brittle and grumpy. Learning to nourish ourselves with self and spiritual practices welcomes us home to who we are.

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