

One Meditation #7, July 2025: **“Lone Rider or Wagon Train?”** *(July 5, 2025, 592 w.)*

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Welcome to this seventh meditation email and thank you for being here. Please consider sharing it. Monthly subjects range from modern to ancient, Western to Eastern, and scientific to spiritual. For more info, see below. – Richard

ONE MEDITATION: LONE RIDER OR WAGON TRAIN?

Two important myths from the American Wild West, 1800s-early 1900s, are good metaphors for practicing meditation. One is the lone rider; the other, the wagon train.

Imagine the rider crossing a plain and climbing a mountain, horse nickering or snorting. Maybe the rider herds cattle with a few other cowpokes. All of them are strong but silent with never a mention of their inner life. They symbolize meditators who are quiet loners in public or hermits in nature, seeking inner silence or a merging with Spirit.

The opposite is people in a wagon train. They hire a leader, gather victuals, and buy wagons. Travelling over desert, wild rivers, and mountain passes, they work together to support, comfort, heal, and feed each other. They symbolize meditators who engage in activities in groups, whether for calming, socializing, or spiritual growth.

Since ancient times, people in the West and Middle East have specialized in wagon trains. While they've had individual prophets and hermits in the wild, usually the major religions have emphasized community. The Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—especially have directed us to communal worship and sometimes even holy wars. So did major ancient polytheistic religions. And anthropologists tell us that even earlier, 12,000-3000 BCE, as Riane Eisler thoroughly documents in *The Chalice & the Blade*, female elders led communities in Earth Goddess rituals for all villagers. Until the late twentieth century, Western and Middle Eastern cultures usually assumed that if you were interested in spirituality, you joined a wagon train: you had a place to worship together or, perhaps, lived in a religious community.

In the East, however, history has favored the lone rider: you explore the landscape of inner life in single meditation or perhaps at a shrine in your home. And while Eastern meditators often have celebrated religious holidays, too, most Eastern religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Taoism—emphasize individual inner development. (Shinto and Confucianism are exceptions.) If you are a seeker of inner quiet or of spiritual life in these four major religions, you must ride your horse alone to cross a desert or scale a mountain, or perhaps find a guru in the wilderness.

Is one way more powerful? In terms of immediate health, science says “no.” In thousands of studies, both choices have been shown to provide greater calm, lowered blood pressure, a slower heartbeat, a decrease in anxiety, and greater long-term health. In terms of spiritual benefits, most mystics say that the results of these two paths are the same or similar. In

addition, decades of polls by top surveyors Gallup and Pew consistently have shown a mild “happiness advantage” for both groups. For example, according to a 2019 Pew Research Center poll, 36% of “actively religious” people polled in the U.S. report being “very happy,” compared to only 25% of the “inactively religious” or “unaffiliated.”

I find both approaches helpful. Meditating alone allows me to learn specific, daily practices. But meditating with others often intensifies my experiences and results.

Robin Wall Kimmerer—Native American economist and author of *Braiding Sweetgrass*—speaks of this in her book *The Serviceberry*. She recalls a next-door neighbor in her rural area reminiscing, “There’s that old line that farmers like to spout, ‘Without farmers, you’d be naked, hungry, and sober.’ But it goes both ways: without good neighbors, you’d also be alone, and that’s worse” (90-91). The same is true of individual meditators and groups: the former grow inner food for the soul; the latter share it. Farmer/lone rider, or community—either works. But sometimes, having both multiples the harvest.

Next Month: WHICH TO CHOOSE: MEDITATION OR SOCIAL ACTION?

Peace, Strength, Joy

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Previous Issues

Jan. 2025, #1: **“What Is Meditation?”** Science says it is a conscious calming of body and mind. Practitioners define it as aware attention for inner growth. **Recommended Book:** Daniel Goleman and Richard Davidson, *Altered Traits: Science Reveals Meditation Changes Mind, Brain, and Body*

Feb. '25, #2: **“What Are Four Main Focuses in Meditation?”** The first two are within (immanent), and outer (transcendent). Either of these can be paired with two others: open waiting, or one-pointed focus. **Recommended:** Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*

March '25, #3: **“Why Breathe Deeply?”** Science says a breath cycle of 8+ seconds triggers nerve-system calmness. It lowers pulse and blood pressure rates, decreases anxiety, and increases self-awareness. **Recommended:** James Nestor, *Breath—The New Science of a Lost Art*

April '25, #4: **“Why Chant, Sing, or Hum?”** Rightly done, each calms the nervous system and mind, leading to better inner attention and silence. **Recommended:** Golding and Golding, *The Humming Effect: Sound Healing for Health and Happiness*

May '25, #5: **“Hanging Out with Birds, Bees, Water, and Trees.”** Nature bathing offers many of the same beneficial effects as meditation. **Recommended:** Elise Ingram, *Forest Bathing: Mindful Meditation Connecting You to Nature and Eco-Consciousness Through the Practice of Shinrin-Yoku*.

June '25, #6: **Buddha’s Five Waters—Which Are You?”** The five “Hindrances” of Buddhism, or five inner “waters,” are resolved in seven “factors” of being awake.” **Recommended:** Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*.
