



# Winter Feast for the Soul

*A 40-day Worldwide Spiritual Practice Period*

*January 15 - February 23  
Every Year Since 2008*

All around the world people are looking for happiness and inner peace. This has been true throughout human history. In 2008, a woman in Idaho named Valerie Skonie and a 13<sup>th</sup> century mystic named Jelalluddin Rumi “connected” in their mutual search for happiness. In a poem, Rumi wrote:

*What nine months does for the embryo, Forty early mornings Will do for your growing awareness*

Valerie wondered if Rumi’s words were literally true: what if forty days of meditation and contemplation (which is what Rumi meant by “early mornings”) could change our awareness and thus our life? Valerie wanted to find out and she wanted others to try it with her. In January 2008, about 150 people gathered daily in small groups or alone in their homes to share the practice of meditation. They made a commitment to themselves and to one another that they would do this every day for forty days. And they did it. Word spread and the next year some 10,000 people in 29 different countries joined the Winter Feast for the Soul, including ten men housed in an incarceration center in Boise, Idaho. Today the Winter Feast continues to include many thousands of participants all over the world. On its web site, spiritual teachers from all traditions provide feast participants with insight, contemplation, and instructions. And a special out-reach program for those who are incarcerated enables those without web access to be part of this world-wide endeavor for peace and insight.

Pope John the 23rd wrote a letter to the world in 1963 on the topic of Peace on Earth (Pacem in Terris) where he said: “We will not have peace on our planet until there is peace in the heart of every person.” By finding our own personal inner place of peace, we make a huge contribution to the world and to the peace that it so badly needs. What you do makes a difference.

At Crain Unit, the chaplaincy volunteers for the Eastern Religions program are making materials for the Winter Feast available to those who want to participate.

## How Does the Feast Work?

It’s simple: each day from Jan. 15<sup>th</sup> to Feb. 23<sup>rd</sup> you will dedicate part of your day to meditation or prayer or spiritual reading or contemplation. This is Quiet Time, time for reflection, time apart from your “ordinary activities.” While it may not be possible in prison to have real “quiet” time, you commit to doing your best for forty days. You make a commitment to do this for 20 minutes every day, or 40 minutes, or an hour – it’s up to you.

The Eastern Religions volunteers will provide you with materials to help you through the feast. There will be a journal where you record the time you meditated or sat quietly every day and where you can answer some questions that help deepen your experience. There will be a page of spiritual quotations, one quote for each day, and a sheet to encourage you to write down your thoughts about the quotations you like the best. And there will be four articles for you to read during the feast, one for each ten-day period. These articles will help you to use your quiet time and give you something to think about throughout the day. Although the feast is all-

inclusive and people of every faith participate, because the Eastern Religions program supports Buddhists at Crain Unit, there will also be articles specifically for Buddhists, which everyone is free to read or not.

## How Do I Sign Up?

Along with this invitation is a commitment form. Please fill it out and return it to an Eastern Religions volunteer. If you can't get to the Eastern Religions service, you can mail the form to the address printed on the form. If you don't have a form but can see someone else's, just copy down the form as best you can and mail that.

***Please submit your commitment form by the end of December.***

At the Eastern Religions services in December and January, materials for the feast will be distributed to those who have submitted a commitment form. For those who signed up but can't make it to the service, the materials will be mailed.

## Meditation Buddies

The Eastern Religions volunteers will attempt to assign a "meditation buddy" to each participant in the feast. A buddy is a person from our congregation in Austin who will write to you during the feast to encourage you to keep going. Assignments depend on how many people sign up and how many volunteers step forward, but we will do our best to ensure that everyone gets a buddy and at least one letter. People have told us in the past that the best part of the feast was receiving letters from their meditation buddy. You can write back to your buddy or not, it's up to you, but buddies like to hear from you!

## What Can You Do Now?

You can begin finding that place of peace inside of yourself right now, today. Begin by sitting quietly with your eyes closed for five minutes a day for the next week or two. It is best to do this in the morning before you begin the day, and perhaps again in the evening just before going to sleep. When you feel ready for more, increase your time to ten minutes each day.

Isn't that simple? And yet...you may find that it isn't easy to sit "quietly" for five minutes let alone ten. The mind is a very busy place, something like a jungle full of wild beasts. We have given our mind the position of Supreme Ruler of our lives and allowed it to dictate our sense of self. The mind, for the most part, was formed when we were young and unable to filter or discern right from wrong, or true from false. It was formed when we were unable to recognize that peace is more powerful than war, that forgiveness is more powerful than anger, that deep inside we all know what is right and true. We just have to get quiet to find that place - to hear that small voice that resides within.

So here are some suggestions for how to hold your quiet time – in other words, instructions on how to meditate:

- Find a quiet place where you can sit with your spine erect, perhaps with your back against a wall. You want to be comfortable and supported without getting so comfortable that you fall asleep.
- With eyes closed begin to focus on your inner world.
- Tell your mind that you are going to give it a rest for the next few minutes. This will not be easy, because the mind is a thought-making machine and it must be retrained to be still so that you can do more inner listening.

- Focus on your breath. It is that simple. If you can just focus on your breath for five or more minutes a day, you will be rewarded in ways that you will never guess. Focusing on your breath takes your attention away from the mind and helps to create the inner peace that you are after.
- As your breath slows down your whole nervous system will begin to unwind. This is where new habits of mind can be formed.
- No matter what happens during your Quiet Time, do not judge yourself or what happens. The fact that you are sitting quietly and that you hold the intention of creating inner peace makes you a hero. No one can take that away from you. Once you learn to stop judging yourself, you will eventually stop judging others. Your compassion toward yourself will grow. You can't be loving and compassionate toward others until you are loving and compassionate toward yourself.

Quiet Time will take you to a place where you can hear the loving, wise inner voice that wants to reach you at every moment of the day and night. You may call it God, your Higher Self, or the Universe. If it is not kind and does not generate peace in your heart, then change the channel, because when you find that quiet place inside you will feel loved and you will then become more loving. You have to do very little to reach this quiet place. The hard part is to quiet your mind. This is something that people in the Western world know very little about. So don't be hard on yourself if it doesn't happen right away. It takes practice...maybe forty days of practice!

The most important thing is not to judge yourself as having failed when you are carried away by your mind and its thoughts. Harsh judgments of yourself spill over into harsh judgments of others. Kindness toward yourself will also spill over into kindness toward others. What could be more important than that?

Sitting still in Quiet Time isn't the only thing you can do to get yourself ready for your Winter Feast commitment. Here are some other suggestions.

**Setting an Intention:** As you get up in the morning, maybe even before you get out of bed, set your intention for your day. You might intend to do your daily meditation, feel gratitude, keep your temper, or notice the beauty in the world around you. You might intend to develop clarity and insight, love and compassion for yourself and others. Whatever it is, define it to yourself and visualize how you might use this intention as you go through your day. Repeat it in your mind until you remember what it is, and remind yourself of it as you go through the day.

**Pause #1:** This is a mini meditation. Imagine that you have a bell. In your imagination, ring the bell and listen to the sound fade away. Notice that as you are listening, you are still. The longer the chime takes to fade away, the more seconds you have of precious quiet time. While you are listening, you stop what you are doing outwardly and you stop the thoughts racing through your mind. This will give you a little distance from whatever stress you are feeling and shift your perspective. If you want, instead of an imaginary bell, you can assign a sound you hear during the day to be your signal for a few seconds of quiet time - even the whistle for count.

**Pause #2:** Something or someone bugging you? Wanna say or do something mean or unwise? Pause for a breath or two or three. Look at the emotions and thoughts you are having. Let go of them. Look at the actions you might take and their consequences. Is there really a need for you to follow your emotions, or are they just leading you into trouble? You can make a choice here, just from putting a pause between yourself and your actions.

**Just Breathe:** Relax. Breathe deeply for several breaths, then normally. Feel your breath coming in through your nostrils and traveling down the body, filling the lungs and expanding the stomach. Feel the air returning up the body and leaving the nostrils. Feel the vitality that your breath brings to your body and feel gratitude for your body and your breath. You can stay with the breath and gratitude for as long as you wish.

**Gratitude:** Reflect on all that you have to be grateful for. Notice the person who does you a kindness, the people that love you for who you are, people who are difficult for you (they are your teachers), the beauty of the earth's sights and sounds in nature, the blessing of a whole body, sufficient food, and shelter – all the blessings of this precious human existence.

**Walking Meditation:** Start with an erect and easy posture, hands folded in front of you, clasped behind your back, or hanging loosely at your sides. Take a slow step forward, paying attention to the set of your heel and toe, the movement of each of your muscles, and your breath. Breathe naturally. Put your foot down slowly, gently but firmly, and take another step, and another, each step slow and reverent, mindful of the whole incredible workings of your body that make walking possible. You may do this indoors or outside.

**Blue Sky Meditation:** Who knew that our childhood play activity of watching clouds was a meditation? You can meditate on the blue sky and the clouds. Sit or lie down in meditation and look up. Let your gaze fall softly on the sky. Watch the clouds as they appear and disappear. Let your thoughts and feelings arise and dissipate naturally.

The heart of meditation is awareness that is like the vast sky. All arising thoughts and feelings are like clouds which arise and vanish into it. The sky does not reject or claim them. When you abide in sky-like awareness, love, wisdom, and compassion shine forth within like the sun, the moon, and the stars.

The Buddha said, "Don't go back over what has passed, nor yearn for what is yet to be. What has passed has been abandoned, and the future is not yet here. The state arising here and now – see it with insight as it is."

*All Blessings to All Beings*