

The First Season



The Furthering Institute · Members' Library

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The First Three Months

Welcome to the Institute. You are a member now, and this short book is what we would tell you if we had you in a room with a table for an hour. It is about the first three months, which is the period we think of as your first season: long enough to find your footing, short enough that nobody expects you to have found anything else.

The first three months are not for achievement. They are for three ordinary things: learning the shape of the practice, meeting a few members, and finding out what you actually do when nobody is watching. Everything else can wait until the second season.

You will be tempted to begin with more than you can keep. Almost everyone does. Read this book, then read *The Quiet Hour*, then choose one hour and one material and keep them for a month before you add anything else.

Nothing is required of you that you cannot do with a chair, a table, a notebook, and one hour a week. The Institute is not a school with a curriculum and not a lodge with grades. It is a shelf, a room, a library, and a company of members who keep a practice.

How to Ask for Help

Ask early and ask plainly. Members who struggle in their first season usually struggle in silence, and the silence is what makes the difficulty worse. There is no question about this practice that is too simple to ask.

Ask one person at a time. A question put to a room will be answered by nobody, or answered by five people at once, which is worse. Choose the member you have spoken to before, or the one whose practice you have seen, and ask them directly.

Ask a question that has an answer. 'How do I begin' is too wide to be useful. 'I have twenty minutes on a Tuesday evening; what would you do with them' can be answered, and the answer will be worth having.

When you have an answer, write it down and use it for a month before asking again. The Institute has no shortage of advice and a great shortage of members who have tried one piece of it for long enough to know what it does.

If you are ever given advice that seems to promise an outcome in the world, a cure, a result, a guarantee, treat it as one member's opinion and nothing more. No member of this Institute speaks for the Institute, and the Institute makes no such promises.

What to Bring to a Conversation

Bring three things to any conversation about your practice: your ledger, one question, and an honest sentence about what you have not done.

The ledger, because the practice is made of ordinary hours and the ledger is where they are. You do not need to show it to anyone. You need to have looked at it yourself, recently, so that you are speaking about the practice you actually keep rather than the one you mean to keep.

One question, chosen in advance. Not three. One question, written down, so that the conversation has somewhere to go and somewhere to stop. A member who arrives with one question usually leaves with an answer. A member who arrives with a dozen usually leaves with a headache.

An honest sentence about what you have not done. This is the hardest of the three and the most useful. It might be: I have not kept the hour for three weeks. It might be: I bought a jar and never opened it. Said plainly and without excuse, it costs nothing and it clears the ground. Said evasively, it will sit in the room for the whole conversation.

Bring nothing else. Not a performance, not a summary of your reading, not a comparison with another member's season. Plain speech is the standard here, and it is easier than it sounds once you have done it twice.

Keeping Your Own Counsel

You are a member of this Institute and you are also your own person. Nothing you are told here is binding on your judgement, and nothing here relieves you of the responsibility of deciding what you will and will not do.

Keep your own counsel about your practice. Speak about it when it is useful to speak about it, and not otherwise. There is no rule of secrecy in this library, and there is also no obligation to explain yourself to anyone, member or otherwise.

Expect to disagree with something in this book, and with members you respect. Disagreement kept in plain speech is a healthy thing on a shelf of this kind. Disagreement kept silent for two years and then produced at a meeting is not.

Do not hand over your judgement to a member who seems more experienced, however experienced they are. Ask them what they do, and why. Then decide for yourself. A practice that is held by someone else's certainty is a practice you will put down the first time that certainty is questioned.

Some things are yours alone, and it is right that they stay that way. What you write in your ledger, what you work with in your hour, and what you make of it are yours. The Institute asks only that you keep the hour and keep the record. It asks nothing of your beliefs.

The Standard the Institute Holds

The Institute holds one standard, and it has three parts: small rooms, plain speech, and no performance of belief. Everything else is a matter of preference, and members are free to differ about it.

Small rooms. We work in small rooms and in small groups. A meeting of six is better than a meeting of sixty. A shelf of twelve jars is better than a cabinet of two hundred. What is small can be known, and what can be known can be practised. When the Institute is offered a large room, we usually decline it, and we would rather explain that plainly than pretend we could not fill it.

Plain speech. We say what we did and what we did not do. We do not dress a practice up in language it has not earned, and we do not use the vocabulary of certainty about things we do not know. When we do not know, we say that we do not know. This is not modesty; it is accuracy, and accuracy is the whole of our method.

No performance of belief. No member is asked to affirm anything, and no member is asked to pretend to affirm anything. If you believe something about a stone, an herb, or an hour, that is yours to hold, and you are not required to state it, defend it, or conceal it. If you believe nothing about any of it, you are equally at home here. The practice does not depend on belief, and we have deliberately built it that way.

The standard cuts both ways. It is a promise the Institute makes to you, and it is a promise you are asked to keep in return: speak plainly to us, and do not perform for us. A member who performs for the Institute has misunderstood the whole arrangement, and the fault is ours if we ever made performing seem worthwhile.

What the Member Program Is

The member program is a standing arrangement rather than a course. It has no beginning, no end, no certificate, and no rank. It is a set of ordinary things held in common, and you may use as much or as little of it as suits the season you are in.

The program is: an hour kept, a ledger kept, one material worked at a time, a conversation once a month with another member, and access to the library and the shelf. That is the whole of it. There is nothing hidden behind the curtain, and there is no further degree to be attained.

The program is also a place to be, which is more useful than it sounds. A room with a table, a lamp, a shelf of jars, and a few members who are quietly working is a considerable thing in a noisy life. Members come to the room for the room as much as for the instruction, and that is by design.

What the Member Program Is Not

The member program is not a treatment, a therapy, or a course of care. Nothing here is offered as a remedy for anything, and no member of the Institute is qualified by membership to advise you about your health, your body, or your household. If you need care of that kind, seek it from a qualified practitioner.

It is not a school, and it will not teach you in the sense you may be expecting. There are no classes to pass and no exams to sit. There is a shelf, a method, a tradition, and other members. What you take from those will be what you put into them.

It is not a brotherhood, a lodge, or a secret society. We have no oaths, no degrees, no hidden knowledge, and no ceremony that a visitor may not see. Members who arrive looking for an inner circle are usually disappointed, and we would rather disappoint them in the first month than in the third year.

It is not a substitute for anything: not for medical care, not for friendship, not for work, not for rest. A practice hour is one hour in a life, and it is not asked to carry more than that. When members begin to lean on the practice for everything, we say so, and we mean it kindly.

And it is not an obligation. You may keep one hour a week or five. You may come to the room monthly or rarely. You may work one material for a year or a different one each season. The Institute asks only that you be honest with yourself about what you are actually doing, and that you not ask us to pretend it is more than it is.

Keeping Your Own Record of the Work

Keep a record, and keep it yourself. The Institute does not keep a file on your practice, and we do not ask to see your ledger. The record is for you, and it is the single most useful thing you will make in your first season.

The record has two parts, and they are different in kind. The first is the ledger of hours: dated, short, factual, one line to a session. The second is a page or two at the end of each month, written more slowly, about what you noticed over the month as a whole.

The ledger answers the question, did I keep the hour. The monthly page answers a different question, what is happening. A practice can be kept faithfully and still be going nowhere; the monthly page is where you find that out, and it is where you decide what to change.

Write the monthly page on the same day each month, and date it. Read back over the previous months before you write. You are looking for two things: the hours you missed and why, and the material or the question that has quietly become interesting to you. The second of those is often the beginning of the next season's work.

Keep the record for a year before you judge it. Three months is long enough to find your footing and too short to see anything clearly. A year of ordinary pages is a document of a real practice, and it will tell you more about yourself than any conversation about practice you are likely to have.

A Letter to the New Member

You have joined a small thing. That is not an apology; it is the point. The Institute is small by choice, plain by preference, and slow by method, and it will not grow into something larger while you are a member of it. What it will do is keep a room, a shelf, and a standard, and hold them steady while you find out what your practice is.

In your first season you will be tempted to do too much, and then, having done too much, to stop. Expect this. It happens to nearly everyone. When it happens, cut the practice down until it is small enough to keep, and keep it. Fifteen minutes kept is the whole of the method; the rest is elaboration.

Ask for help before you need it. Speak plainly when you speak. Keep your own counsel about the things that are yours. Do not perform, either for us or for yourself. And if you are ever offered a promise about what this practice will do in the world, decline it politely and come back to the shelf.

You will not be asked for your beliefs. You will be asked to keep an hour and keep a record, and you will be left to make of it what you can. That is a small request and it is the whole of what we have to offer. It is enough for a lifetime if you let it be ordinary.

Welcome. The room is yours on the days you come to it.

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