

Advice on Retreat

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Let go of the idea that there is a perfect retreat place.

There is no such place! After all, this is samsara, not nirvana.

When we think about doing a retreat, we tend to remember famous practitioners and want our retreat to be like theirs: done in perfect isolation; with no distractions; with no interruptions; and filled with spiritual accomplishments. Sounds good, but in fact this ideal comes from a selective reading of their actual retreat circumstances.

We might think of Milarepa spending long months and years alone in his cave, and conveniently forget other facts. Milarepa was often paid visits by robbers, hunters, demons and—last but not least—by his well-meaning sister, who wanted to reform him into a respectable lama! When we imagine Tsong Khapa, we cannot leave out that he was pursued by the Chinese Emperor, who wanted him to come to China to be the court lama.

In our own retreat, we may not be pursued by emperors or demons. Yet our sister or brother may check in with us, despite our protestations. Thus our first task is to make peace with reality. The real retreat is not created by the circumstances but by the mind!

How do we create such a retreat mind?

Dedicate yourself completely to the retreat. No wobbly intentions! *Before* actually starting retreat, generate as strongly as possible the conviction that what you are doing is the best way to spend your time in this life. You will renew and strengthen this conviction during your retreat, but you must have it in place when you begin or you will soon be doing something else.

To generate conviction, you need to study. Read the life stories of great meditators from the past. Take inspiration from your teachers as they share their experiences.

Doing a retreat is not a spur of the moment decision. We shouldn't jump into retreat on "impulse," say after hearing a teaching about a great practitioner doing retreat and deciding we must do the same. After a few days in retreat the "teaching high" abates, we will lose our way and feel inadequate. The problem isn't that we are not good retreat material. We simply did not prepare well enough. We did not do our homework.

A retreat mind has a sense of renunciation.

It is important to understand the benefits of retreat and to view the ordinary way of living in the world as basically meaningless. This is a hard insight to get and can take years to

develop. It requires study. The starting point is Buddha's most basic teaching: the Four Noble Truths. If we do not understand the nature of suffering and its pervasiveness, there will come a time when we'll receive that visit from the well-meaning sibling, and be convinced by them that we are wasting our time.

Milarepa was not swayed by his sister because he was a genuine renunciate. He knew that what his sister was holding out to him as a worthy goal was unsatisfactory. His songs are the songs of a person who understood the Four Noble Truths deeply. No one could shake his renunciation because he knew there was nothing else worthy of his effort. Therefore we must study and contemplate the Buddha's teachings before rushing off to retreat. Mila did not study them *after* Marpa walled him in. Mila developed renunciation and *then* did retreat. There is a profound lesson for us here.

Generate humility.

Although we look to the great practitioners for motivation and inspiration for retreat, when we model ourselves on Milarepa or Tsong Khapa there is a danger that we might begin to actually view ourselves as their equals. Imagining ourselves to be modern day Milarepas could be fatal to us and our retreat. Remember at all times, each of us is just an ordinary person, albeit an ordinary person trying to do something completely extraordinary. It is the activity that is extra-ordinary, not us! And don't let anyone convince you otherwise.

Without this accurate vision of ourselves, we will meet misfortune. For example, we might skip some practices we consider "too basic" for great meditators. And as a result we would lack the required foundation for later practices and end up in a dead end instead of moving forward. Then it is easy to get discouraged with practice and believe it is not really the solution to suffering that it purports to be. In such a case, the problem is not the practices—it is how we have gone about practicing them. It is a bit like trying to graduate from college before learning to read and then blaming the college for our failure.

A lack of humility can also lead to severe mental and physical illness. Meditative retreat is perilous. We should not fool ourselves about this. A set of practices that can transform an ordinary mind and body into the mind and body of a Buddha is a powerful thing. Practitioners who have enormous egos but very little preparation and experience often end up mentally destabilized and/or physically ill.

I have seen practitioners develop problems ranging from severe wind diseases or *rlung* to actual psychoses. Wind disorders can leave you feeling physically and mentally disturbed. You no longer sleep well or at all. You might have severe bodily pains. It can become difficult for you to be around other people. You might lack focus, or feel distraught, angry, or miserable. Once ill in this way, it takes a long time to recover. Instead of making progress, you only regress. Not only does retreat then become impossible, but even ordinary living becomes a burden.

No wonder we are urged to remain close to our teachers, who never seem to tire of reminding us how ordinary we are!

Get advice and instructions from a qualified teacher.

The teachers I trust are those who have actually done long retreat, not those who have simply read about the process while studying texts. We need the guidance of someone with experience. We can read the texts ourselves but we cannot read between the lines: what is it like to do this practice, how should we feel or not feel, how long is too long, how do we know when we are pushing too hard or not hard enough, when do we move on to the next step, and so on. This information is not in the text and never has been. It was passed from teacher to student over the centuries. The texts are generalized instructions. Your teacher is the key to personalizing these instructions for you. And, since our teachers are chosen by us because they “fit” us in some strange and clear manner, they are uniquely placed to help us do a retreat that is suited for us as individuals.

We really do need a teacher! Like a driving instructor, your teacher must have the license to be a lama, as well as the required experience and knowledge. Shantideva reminds us that real teachers are difficult to find. And it is they who are qualified to advise us to do a retreat in the first place.

Having received the advice and instructions and having done our homework, then and only then are we qualified to do a retreat.

Start modestly.

Most people cannot immediately jump into a long retreat—begin with brief ones. A weekend is a “long retreat” if you have not done a retreat before. Being alone for forty-eight hours is a LONG time when you aren’t used to it. In fact, being completely alone for a beginner can be counterproductive. So it might be helpful to do retreat with a couple of other people at first. You can help motivate and pace one another. This is a good way to learn the ropes before striking out on your own.

So start slowly and pace yourself. Don’t do too much for too long. Take frequent breaks, especially at the beginning of your retreat. Don’t skip the breaks; they are necessary.

Get enough sleep. Don’t try meditating all night. Those meditation boxes were meant to keep yogis awake—they weren’t meant to be slept in. When you are ready for a box, you won’t need to sleep very much. I need to sleep and I bet most of the people who ask me about retreat also need sleep. Remember, the Dalai Lama goes to bed each night.

OK, I'm in retreat. Now what?

If it becomes noisy outside, what do you do? Wear earplugs? Grit your teeth and press on?

It isn't easy to meditate when you are tense. If there is noise, or if you become too tired or distracted, don't force yourself to sit and do focused meditation. It won't work. You'll only wear yourself out trying. Get up and do something else. Read or take a walk or do the laundry. Or maybe try another meditation instead. (Maybe you can't do your visualization, but you could practice in another way: repeating mantras or generating compassion, for example.) The one thing you must not do is the activity you found impossible. This is common sense but it is amazing how a retreat can remove all traces of common sense. If it's not working, don't do it!

Compassion, compassion, compassion!

The stronger your sense of compassion, the better your retreat will be. I find having a pet around is very helpful for this reason. A pet forces us to think of its needs. And this is very helpful when we are only thinking of ourselves and retreat.

If you want to remain in retreat for a long time, you need to develop an enormous sense of compassion. Staying in retreat for years is impossible if you are doing it only for yourself. After a few years you'll leave retreat because you'll become convinced you are needed "out there" and that remaining in retreat is selfish. This feeling of selfishness happens because you did not incorporate all other beings into your retreat from the start. Your mind left others "out there" while you were alone "in here." An illusion, of course, yet one that matters because it opens the door and throws you back into the world to reconnect with those beings you abandoned when you started retreat.

If you are doing retreat only for yourself, you'll run out of steam after a few years. It is hard work day in and day out. There are no vacations. It becomes too demanding and too lonely. BUT if you are doing this work for the sake of others who presently cannot do it themselves, others who need you so they can stop suffering, you gather courage to go on.

Bodhisattvas are real warriors. Their courage comes from knowing that infinite others are depending on their efforts and ultimate success. Compassion is the key that keeps the retreat door locked until the goal is achieved.

Always focus on the basics, no matter how advanced your practice.

Dedicate and accumulate merit. Review the fundamentals again and again so that they become ingrained and until your automatic reactions become dharmic ones. Remember that a retreat is the time to create new habit patterns. Create new habits, and not even death can take them away.

You take refuge inside your retreat hut to strip away the habits that trap you in samsara and to replace them with reactions befitting a Buddha. The walls protect you in your nakedness while you develop that Buddha body, that Buddha mind. You are not trying to escape the world. You are getting ready to fully embrace it.

This is the most important thing you have ever done. It is the most important thing you can possibly do. Don't ever give up.