



THE ASIAN CLASSICS INSTITUTE



DIAMOND MOUNTAIN UNIVERSITY

The Wisdom of Solitude Preparing for Long-term Retreat

Reading One: Preparation and pre-retreat (to-do list, what to bring, retreat basics)

[Note: This reading has been taken from the post-retreat interviews of Geshe Michael and the rest of the group who did 3-year retreat at Diamond Mountain between March 2000 and June 2003.]

Motivation for retreat

“The main thing you need to be aware of is your motivation. Everyone’s motivation will be slightly mixed if they’re human. Like part of your motivation might be how people would think you’re such a big shot because you did a three-year retreat. And some of your motivation might be a little negative—like if some people were giving you a problem you’d think, ‘Well okay I’ll just go away for three years. You see what you can do without me.’

They say the same thing before you become a monk. If you have a motivation to become famous because you’re becoming a monk or if your motivation is to just follow what other people have done because you want to be considered part of that group then your vows aren’t very pure. In some case they say they don’t even form if your motivation’s really bad. So then it’s the same thing when you go into a deep retreat. If your motivation doesn’t at least have a heavy component of wanting to help other people then you’re going to have problems. You’re definitely going to have problems.”



“This is the hardest thing anybody’s ever done. It’s not worth it if you are doing it for yourself. You don’t want to be happy yourself that much. It’s not worth it. It’s really not. I realised that first week in retreat. I’m like you know I really don’t think I want to be here for myself, but then, you have to do it for others. You look at the suffering of the world and you realise that it’s the only thing you can do. You have faith in the practice. That just keeps your ass here, you know. You don’t have a choice. You have to do it for others.”

Collecting Virtue

“One of the most important things to know before you undertake a long retreat is that you have to collect your virtue beforehand. You need a lot of virtue to do a good retreat, and you have to start collecting it as soon as you know you’re going to do the retreat. It’s much more difficult if you get into retreat and then try to collect your virtue, because for example there are no people to collect your virtue on once you get into three-year retreat. You have to prepare probably two or three years in advance starting to collect your merit.”



“The best way to collect merit is to serve a Lama or to do other work for the Dharma. You have to commit your life to this. There’s no other way. If you don’t do that you’re likely to fail at your retreat. Before the three-year retreat the retreaters all worked hard to collect virtue. After the retreat, they said that if they had it to do over again, they’d probably work a lot harder beforehand to avoid the obstacles that came up during retreat. Everything that you do beforehand is going to come up on you a thousand times bigger and you’re going to have to stare it in the face. And it’s going to be hard.”

Pre-retreat crisis

“I didn’t realize until this year that I had had a crisis before retreat. I started to look back and think when did my weird behavior start? And then I realized it was about six weeks before retreat. I started getting weird emotional waves, emotions that I’ve never had before, like anger—fierce anger and nervousness.

Then the first day of retreat I had a huge depression attack. I’d never had one in my whole life. I’d never been able to understand what depression is because in my whole life I’d never been depressed a single hour. And then suddenly I had like this three or four hour depression attack, and I realized it was the tension of going into this three-year thing.

I just wanted to say that for future people. You won’t even know that it’s going on. It’ll just be happening. For me it was happening and I didn’t know that it was. I just thought I was having a bad day or something. Now looking back I realize I must have been really scared or really anxious about this thing that I was getting into. It’s a very real concern and I think even those of us who didn’t seem to have it had it.”



“I’d like to say my pre-retreat upheaval theme was that it was a lot like what I think dying is going to be like. Only kind of slowed down over a period of a year so I could watch myself saying goodbye to my friends and my family and my life as I knew it, and

my belongings. And, finally, the last thing to go was my identity, which I had to give up as I came into retreat.

It was just a long, long process of letting go life as I knew it. I felt as though I were consciously wiping myself off the face of the earth and removing myself from my close relations, like with my mother, and I had a boyfriend going into retreat, and removing myself from their lives. At first I felt like I was going to leave this blank hole that would kind of stay there, be there when I got back.

As I entered retreat I realised you know if those people can live without me for three years they don't need me. I'm an only child of a single mother, you know. I like to think that my mother needs me to live, you know. It's really scary to realise that nobody needs you, you know. For me it was really scary to realise that nobody needs me in their life. I can go away for three years and everybody's going to be okay, you know. I remember sitting in the tent the first week and just having that kind of hit home and be like, nobody needs me in the world. I'm here. I'm not going to be in contact with anyone. And they're going to be fine. I like to think that my mom's world revolves around me, you know. But it doesn't. And that was a real hard thing.

I just felt like I had died but I was still kind of conscious you know. So I was kind of having to deal with no longer having a place in the world, and no longer having my old identity through my relationships with other people. They were no longer feeding me an identity so I didn't know who I was supposed to be. I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing. There was just kind of this blank—this huge blank for my future three years. And it was terrifying. It was totally terrifying.

And for the last few months before retreat it was like approaching this bottomless precipice at a run, you know, and just knowing that the solid ground was going to give out real soon on March third, 2000. The solid ground of life, as I know it, was going to run out. And I was conscious of jumping over a cliff not knowing anything about what that meant: whether I was going to survive, what was going to survive about me, how was I going to change, what was my daily life going to be like? I mean everything was just a complete unknown. And that was really terrifying."

Closing up your life before retreat

"I think it was a really good idea that we set aside five or six weeks before we went into the first deep retreat. In other words I'll be very honest and very sincerely I don't think anyone who is going into three year retreat will ever have their life wrapped up except the day before retreat. See what I mean? You can say all you want. You can say get your life wrapped up three weeks before you come to the retreat site. It's not going to happen like that. We were doing stuff in the car on the way to the retreat place. We were still sending emails in the car on the way to the retreat.

And so you've got to assume that people are going to get here stressed out already because of all of that closing up their lives for three years. And then I think it's very wise to have like a six weeks lead-in time. We had classes so we didn't not see each

other. And the retreat preparation classes were a good bridge. We didn't have a lot of pressure. Then we had meetings about how we will run the retreat and stuff like that. And so it wasn't like a big shock that suddenly you've got to go in that room and not be with anybody and start retreat. So I think that's a very wise thing.

Also then the people need to get to know each other because it's not likely I think in most cases that everyone will be as close as we were before retreat. I think there'll often be cases in retreat where you don't know somebody that well and they're coming into retreat with you. So it gives you time to get to know each other."



"You must have meetings in advance to decide on retreat guidelines, and everyone should attend. You've got to have a Vinaya. (*note: this is referring to the code of conduct set down by the Buddha.*) You've got to. That's what Vinaya was for. You've got to have a consensus. Until you have a consensus among the retreatants what the rules are going to be I don't think you should go into retreat."

Resolving Relationships

"I remember seeing in the Bible that I was reading: Jesus said that if you go to the altar with some expensive gift and you remember that you had a problem with somebody, leave the gift on the floor and go away and go work it out and then come back and offer it on the altar. He was very adamant about it.

"So, I think, this is the same thing you know. Before going into retreat, which is like putting a gift on the altar, go and work out all the personal problems you had. He put it this way: if you have called someone a bad word once in your life then don't put that gift on the altar. Go and apologise to that person and then come back because that's the greater gift. That's the greater offering."



"One important part of resolving relationship issues is the last meeting you have with each important person. So I advise someone going into a long retreat, if you have what you think is going to be your last meeting, and there are still loose ends or loose emotions, or some bad words go between you, then set up another meeting because the last meeting stays with you. Don't leave unkind loose ends with people.

"If something's not resolved with somebody in what you thought was going to be your last meeting with them, then stay in town for another day and meet them again and resolve it, and then go into retreat. It's like it's very important when you go to sleep, not to go to sleep in a bad frame of mind, with doubts or anger or anything like that. Don't go to sleep with any problems on your mind. Don't go into retreat with any problems."



“It’s important to contact the people, ahead of time, the ones that you have trouble with. I remember before retreat Lama Zopa’s attendant kept really pressuring me to resolve things with my father and my brother, both of whom I had been estranged with. I was like it’s hopeless, they hate me, there’s no use. And he kept really, really insisting that I do it. I just felt that there’s no point. I felt so discouraged about it.

“In the first six months of retreat I think, one of my biggest experiences was realising the extent of my self-cherishing. And one of the things that I did was I had this complete turnaround with my father. I’d been really blaming him for our screwed up relationship and I really got it that it was me. So I ended up writing him a letter and actually not burning it, but sending it. And I just took all responsibility for our relationship in the letter. I just wrote it and I said, ‘I’m sorry it’s been so difficult for so long. It’s all my fault.’ I really did. And I really felt it for the first time what I had done to create this situation. I got this beautiful letter back from him saying, ‘I’m really sorry too. No, it’s all my fault.’

“It just changed the dynamic and I was able to just drop this obsessive remorse thing about my relationship with my dad. It was one exchange of letters and then after that he started writing me during the breaks. I made my list of a hundred people, but I couldn’t write all of them. But it might be important if it’s some really heavy object that keeps coming up for you over and over again.”



“You must resolve friend and family issues before—must must must resolve all issues with friends and family before you start. If you don’t, all you will think about is the relationship issues that you didn’t resolve. I think some people have this conception that when you go into like a yurt in retreat you leave some of your mind behind [*laughter*]. You get to escape from your old life into your new life. And it’s not like that. You take everything with you. I mean everything comes up, you know. And don’t pretend that it won’t. Don’t be in denial. And don’t think that that one person you had a fight with ten years ago that you’re still a little bitter about won’t matter because it does. You’ll remember them in retreat even if you don’t remember them before retreat.”



“It’s really important to be very clear about tying things up in a very clear way so that people don’t think I could still send you a message, especially at first, because people aren’t used to it. People tend to get upset with the caretakers ... if they don’t hear from the retreat, half the time then they get upset with the caretakers who they might think are preventing them from interacting with their loved ones. So be sure to explain to everyone what you will be doing and for how long, so they won’t worry or get upset that they can’t contact you.”

Get used to retreat and to the retreat place

“Before you start a three-year retreat, try and do one or two month-long retreats and get the feeling of what you’ll be like and what you’ll need. You’re never going to be able to guess about all the things that you’re going to need on three-year retreat, but at least you’ll have a little bit of an idea of what you’re going to be like.”



“Time spent in advance in the retreat environment is good if it’s possible. Like we did a ten-day retreat here six months before we came, to try to adjust to the desert. Now that’s a ridiculous thing because you can’t do it in ten days, but the environmental shock was pretty heavy here. We were coming from zero feet elevation in New York and a humid climate to the high desert. And I think that preparation would be good. “



“The retreat place was sort of up in the air when we went into retreat. We didn’t know if it was going to be bought or not. Maybe we’d have to move or something like that. And I think it’s important that if possible the place should be set for three years.”

Financial issues

“No open issues in your life. I had open projects and I hadn’t finished my financial reports and stuff like that. And you also shouldn’t go in—in Vinaya you’re not allowed to go into the monastery if you’re in debt. You have to clear the debt first and then come into the monastery.

So I think that’s a good idea. I don’t think that’s good facing you three years later with interest. The money and the place should be absolutely set and determinate fixed before you go in you know. There should be enough money or provisions already made.”



“Try to do your taxes before you go in. If you’re going in for a long period of time, try to arrange to have your taxes done and for people to take care of your finances, pay of all your bills.”



“The money and the places should be set before you go into retreat. A retreatant shouldn’t be in doubt that there’s enough money to carry out the full length of the retreat. That’s another emotional stress they don’t need. They shouldn’t go into retreat until there’s enough money to keep them in retreat for three years or else they should delay the retreat I think. They shouldn’t be up in the air about whether they’re able to

stay. That's a terrible emotional thing in the back of your mind you wouldn't be able to concentrate."

Retreat Master

"I think you need to have an emergency outlet for when something comes up. Whether it's a traditional lama or just someone that you're very close to that you respect to talk to. I would advise people to set that up in advance, you know. Like, I'm not going to talk to anybody for three years but if I really need you I'm going to write to you okay? And just have it. Have that available for yourself because things come up you know.

The first six months are probably the hardest and it will make you at ease to know that you have an emergency outlet even if you don't use it."



"I think you should have a retreat master. In the future I think there should be one person on the outside who is really qualified, who's been through three-year retreat or been through a one-year retreat and who is going to be pretty much on site. I know the Kagyus have this rule pretty strictly. I don't mean it has to be a lama. It should be someone you can reach with questions and emails and phone or something like that. Maybe even a cell phone in your yurt if you need. But with the lama—only with the lama—because he's in the tsam anyway. Then I think you should have a retreat master who is a senior student who's been through a heavy retreat and can come in and give you advice. "

Advice from Lamas

"Christie hla and I went around to some high Lamas that we knew had experience in these teachings and the practices that we intended to do. And that was extremely valuable during the retreat, to just think back on them and what they'd said. We visited one very great Sakya Lama and one of the things he'd told us was to take it easy. He kept saying, 'Take it easy.' I think it's important to meet with a Lama or someone who has actually done retreat. There's many lamas I think who haven't done three-year retreat or long retreat then I don't think you'd get the same kind of advice."



"I really agree about the short retreats but I would be more radical. I'd say you shouldn't do a three-year retreat until you've built up—like you've done two weeks a lot and then you've done one-monthers a lot and then you've done several—maybe four or five three-monthers and then you've done six-monthers. I think it's crazy to do what we did. I just didn't know it. There wasn't anybody to ask really. We went from one month to three years. That was very unwise."

Have a plan for after the retreat

“Even at the beginning of retreat I think you should have some sort of broad coming-out plan that everybody knows about so they don’t stress out. Like about eight months ago we wrote the board of DM and said can you keep us in food for three months after retreat so that people don’t stress out about June 7 (*the day after the retreat ended*). Will they have to run to Tucson and start digging ditches because they don’t have any money. You know what I mean?

So that kind of plan I think should be part of the retreat from the beginning because it’s a big area of stress for a retreatant in the last year or six months that what’s going to happen to me the day the retreat ends. So I think there should be like a three-month buffer where there’s a common kitchen. Even if there’s not enough money there’s basic minimum food for everybody and use of a car if they need to go—wherever—to start fundraising looking for sponsors and stuff like that. They should know that ahead of the retreat and they shouldn’t have to worry about it.”