



THE ASIAN CLASSICS INSTITUTE



DIAMOND MOUNTAIN UNIVERSITY

## The Wisdom of Solitude Preparing for Long-term Retreat

### Reading two: Housing, physical concerns, emergencies, non-violence, animal visitors

*From the Hatha Yoga Pradipika:*

*“The yogi should live alone in a hermitage and practice in a place the length of a full prostration, where there is no hazard from rocks, fire, or water, and which is in a well-administered and virtuous kingdom, where good alms can be easily attained.*

*“This is the description of the yoga hermitage as prescribed by the siddhas for the yoga practitioners. The room of practice should have a small door, without windows, holes, or cracks, being neither too high nor too low. It should be spotlessly clean, wiped with cow manure (a common antibacterial agent), and free from animals or insects. Outside there should be an open platform with a thatched roof, a well, and a fence. The appearance of the hermitage should be pleasant.*

*Yogi Swatmarama*

### Housing and physical concerns:

#### Boundaries

Q: “What are the differences in the boundaries in a three-year retreat and a two-week one? We were saying earlier that the important thing in the three years is not to go crazy and you can have a looser setup in terms of your view and maybe have a place to walk.”

Geshe Michael: “I think you should do that in a three-year retreat. I’ve spoken to several high lamas of this tradition and one of them was adamant that the most important thing was to take it easy and not go crazy. You should see the mountains. I could see you having a place where you could walk. It gets pretty boring after a couple of months because you know every single rock.”



“Personally I think it’s very very important—even if you don’t follow tradition for the rest of your retreat or if you try to develop new traditions—the tradition of how to close a boundary should be followed very strictly. And the boundary of the general area and the boundary of your own retreat space. Sometimes you get the feeling that some

rituals are too long and kind of silly but those particular rituals I think... even if you don't particularly believe in those beings who are supposed to be protecting you, go ahead and do the whole thing by the book. Do everything exactly by the book. I think that helped us a lot.

"We were very very detailed and strict in how we closed the boundary properly according to the rituals. I thought it was really good that we had a consensus beforehand that the caretakers would stick to certain paths moving through the tsam and that there would never be any visitors. We asked the caretakers not to go off the paths through the tsam. And we also made agreements among ourselves that there would be generalized areas that one person wouldn't come within the whole area of another person's yurt. And that put my mind at ease. We never had a single incident in the whole retreat of a person coming into the whole general area of the tsam or our part of the tsam. I felt it was good that we set that up in advance.

"I think a clear forceful and well-informed policy: it has to be clear to everybody. It has to be strong, and you have to make sure that everybody knows about it. I think sometimes you get problems when you're not clear. Like if you're wishy-washy or you don't know what you want, don't expect the caretakers to guess what you want. You have to be very clear. I told them at the beginning even if my root Lama passes away don't tell me; I don't want to know. I don't want to know anything. And I think you have to be very strict like that."



"Some people it turned out really needed a bigger area to walk in than the tsam that we defined. And I found that in other past retreats I've done. I've done one-month retreats up at Flagstaff where I really really needed to walk on the nearby mountain. I just decided. You will need more space to walk than you thought and it's good to have it when you need it."

### **Meditation space**

"I was going to talk about the general space of where we sat and stuff. I think it's important to talk about the physical aspect of the cushion and stuff like that. So I have a long list. I also agree that it's important to enclose the space and make it a sacred space. And we used some old saris half-way across the yurt and we enclosed the meditation area. And then we had a rail around the altar—somebody brought us a Christian altar rail that had been taken out of a church that didn't need it anymore. And so we had a very beautiful sacred space.

"I think when you have two people it's different than when you have one. A physical box around all four sides would somehow not be right with someone that you're practicing closely with. So we had sort of a different arrangement where we faced each other the whole retreat and we got that energy from each other the whole retreat. So there was never a time when you weren't meditating in front of another person.

"We found a Tibetan carpet underneath to be very useful because we were on the floor. And so between us and the floor there was a Tibetan carpet, because it's all natural materials, it's all wool. And in the summer it's cool and in the winter it's warm. For

me—for us—it was a very nice material to have. We also put a light all-cotton blanket right on top of that—a very light loosely-woven thin all-cotton blanket on top of that—so that’s what our knees were on. So you have support under your knees but then you could take it and send it in with the laundry and wash it every month or two, and it wouldn’t get grungy. And somehow there was more aeration under your butt. Like you didn’t get sweat building up under your butt and your knees, which was nice, even in hot weather.

“I’ve used many different kinds of cushions throughout my whole life and the one I’ve settled on most recently, say in the last five years, is the crescent shaped one with the buckwheat hulls inside, because somehow the buckwheat is a natural substance. And then preferably to get natural all-cotton if you can; it breathes better and takes the sweat better. What I find with the cushion is that you need to experiment with the amount of buckwheat hulls. You know, like before we do a long retreat we always spend an hour pulling them out, putting them back in, pulling them out, and figuring out just what’s the right amount. And we keep extra buckwheat hulls on the side in case they flatten out after a while. I just found that it forms to your butt really well, and especially if you’re doing different kinds of meditation postures. Like if you’re doing a half lotus then your buttocks aren’t equal in back slightly, and then you have to change. I find you have to support it more under one side. Whereas if you’re doing a full lotus it changes, again and if you’re doing *siddhasana* then it changes again. So I like to have the flexibility of being able to change the height behind.

“We didn’t use a back. I’ve tried different kinds of retreats, some where I had something I could lean back on, and then times that I didn’t have anything to lean back on. And what we did the whole three years is we didn’t have anything to lean back on and we just built up our backs. We did very very heavy yoga we did very very heavy ballet and we put in many exercises—like the *vinyasas* are very good for building up your back. And I have a feeling that’s maybe why the tradition of *vinyasa* in Sri Pattabhi Jois’ system came like that. Maybe one reason is that it really strengthens the muscles in the upper and lower back. Whereas in the past I’ve had to lean back during even one-month retreats, this whole three years we didn’t use anything and it was fine. We felt really good.

“Also if you have a gut—any kind of a belly—if you can get rid of it, you’ll be able to sit much better and more straight. What makes it difficult for most people to sit straight in meditation is that they overeat, and then they have more flesh in the front, and then that unbalances the spine and it starts to hurt after a while.”



“One of the students in New York donated all of us a collapsible table before retreat, and for us it was probably the best thing that we had in the whole yurt. We used it all the time during *lerung*. It was perfect and it was perfect height: it was very thin, it was natural wood, it was strong, it didn’t fall apart, it was stable. We used it the whole retreat and it was just perfect; we used it for all our study also. Any time we write it keeps your back straight and we always sit on the floor. And so I just think if you can find one like that.

“You have to find one with the exact height. Because if it’s not high enough you’ll bend over and your back will start to hurt and your neck will start to hurt. And if it’s even a little too high—there were places in England where office workers were given what’s given a ship captain’s desk. It was up to your chest almost and they would stand up for an hour at a time and work standing. And so I think to get a little table that’s a little too high for you and that will force your back to be straight.

## **The Altar**

“I’ve found that people sometimes tend to put their altars too high relative to the meditation seat. Since in retreat you’re going to spend most of your time on your meditation seat, I think it’s cool to put *thangkas* and stuff at the eye level for that seat, although it’s not the proper level for when you walk in, you see what I mean? But since you’re spending like ten hours a day on that level, you can’t actually look at all the images. Rather they’re over your head and you can’t even see them. So try that out. So actually we put some *thangkas* up on the side of our altar.

“Plain colored cloth on the table between us and plain colors in front of your eyes so your eye doesn’t get drawn away. Clean up when you get up in the morning, obviously. We found it really important when we had some ceremonies that had goodies not to get them in the area of our meditation. Like anything that had crumbs or stuff like that, because then bugs are crawling all over you all the time. I mean, just try to think of ways to keep bugs away from your meditation area, which means when you have *tse chu* or something like that, make sure nothing drops, or nothing that they would like to eat or drink.



## **Boundaries**

“There were some procedures that our Lama implemented within the first month of retreat that benefited the adjustment period. One of them was that he mapped out the retreat property, and that ensured that we didn’t see each other by accident to interact. The fact that each of us had our own part of the property assigned to us really reinforced the stability of the adjustment period by not seeing anyone. This was one way of permanently cementing the idea of shrinking your physical world to one person being in it, which was yourself.

“The second thing that we did within the six months was to investigate noise levels before retreat testing to find a right volume that wouldn’t disturb your neighbour. For example I knew before we started retreat that any volume above number three level on the radio would invade the privacy of others. And this was good.”



## **Water**

“Another adjustment that I think affected me was adjusting to the two gallons of water we had daily. We had no water on the land. We got our daily ration of two gallons of water. I do not think before retreat that anyone was aware of the water consumption

because the supply was always greater than the demand. So this never came into our mind. I mention this as a big adjustment because I felt I wanted to encourage anyone who was planning a similar undertaking. It is just a simple mastery of getting over what the world tells you that you need.

“We had a deck which was fabulous to use for baths in the summertime. And because our yurts had fences around them you had total privacy. In the winter you could use an aluminium tub inside. I would save my water for about five days before I could take what I referred to as a luxurious bath. I liked to make it a special time by burning incense playing music while bathing near the wood stove.

“After the first winter, when I had my routine established, my hankering slowly diminished about my previous bathrooms before retreat. This was a private exploration of challenging how long I could conquer myself and adjusting to my circumstances and making do with what I have.”

## **Emergency procedures**

“I thought it’s very important if you’re taking long walks that you should leave a note in which direction you’re going, especially around here. If you got bit by a rattlesnake we didn’t know what direction to search for you. A lot of people were going out of their retreat *tsam* border, and I wasn’t aware of that. I got kind of concerned because we wouldn’t know where to look. We wouldn’t even know what direction to go in.

“So I think your food box is an automatic alert. If you don’t pick up two meals they know to start looking. I think it would be always good, even starting now, to leave a note: ‘I’m going to walk west today,’ or ‘I’m walking south’. Just a general direction, as the snakes come out especially.



“I think we said at the beginning a car should be available with keys in it at all times and with a map of the hospital. I think that’s very important, like just if the care person happens to be walking somewhere or they’re not around. I think there should be a cell phone available in an isolated area like this with all the emergency numbers on it.”



“I didn’t know what to do with a snake. How far can a rattlesnake jump? And what are you supposed to do if you see one in your yard? Should you try to get them out or should you leave them alone? We never really resolved that question. I know Petra was told by the hospital people just leave them alone, but when it’s sitting for four or five hours in your yard, you’re afraid that you might step on him when you forget. I think we’d have to train them. And with bites: if people get a bite like a rattlesnake bite they shouldn’t even think about not blowing the alarm horn.”



“I was really happy when we got the first-aid kit in the first week. That was so thoughtful. It had sleeping pills in it, which I’d never used in my whole life. I think we used them three or four times in the whole three years. But just to have a first-aid kit is a sense of security.

“I think there should be training on what to do in a fire. I think there should be fire drills especially when you’re living in a place like this. I’ve been burned out at one retreat cabin up north in Arizona. I thought I was a tough guy but I saw that fire—twenty, thirty miles an hour coming down the mountain. I just got out with my suitcase. I had to leave a lot of stuff behind. You’ve got no idea how dangerous a fire is. Seventeen guys went to the hospital about a block away. They got caught just on the same afternoon—fire fighters. And they’re trained. And they all got caught and they all got burned. I was freaked out. You don’t know how fast they move and how dangerous they are.”



“I think there should be doctors available for consultation like we had one of the retreatants’ sister, who was very helpful. It would be nice to develop some kind of dental thing that could come to you. We tried really hard with the caretakers. I assumed there was some kind of mobile dental thing, but there’s just not. In the whole of Arizona there’s no such thing, because everyone just gets into a car and goes to the local town. There’s a five dollar kit that you can get—it’s a ball of epoxy or something that you stuff in your tooth. And Christie would do my tooth every three or four months. I’ve had this for three years. I had a huge cavity for three years and it’s still okay. It hasn’t gotten worse because I’ve kept it covered. So I think everybody should be trained how to do that if they’re in an isolated area.”



“In the Vinaya there’s a lot of rules like to protect the group. There are rules against doing stupid things that would hurt the whole group’s effort. For example one monk’s vow is that I can’t climb in a tree past a certain point, because if I fell out and broke my leg it would hurt the Sangha. You see what I mean? They have to take me to the hospital. They have to spend the money. One person’s irresponsible behavior could hurt others.

“I’m not allowed to go into water deeper than my navel unless there’s a special purpose, just because I might drown. And it had happened at Sera. Two or three kids have drowned in the local river. It just hurts everybody. It hurts the whole community and the whole Sangha.

“So I think once you go into retreat with other people and once caretakers are taking care of you have a responsibility to the whole Sangha you know what I mean? Your emergency position changes: you can’t take risks that you would take for yourself because you’re not going to have to take care of yourself when you get hurt. So I think that’s something that should be drilled into future retreatants—a sense of community responsibility should be drilled into those who go into a retreat together.”



“Stove safety goes without mentioning. Always keep the door closed. Sometimes they would send wood that was too large to fit in the stove. And I would send them a nasty note saying that somebody’s going to try to use it and they’ll leave the door open. And then they’ll go to sleep. Sparks would come out two or three feet sometimes, so there should be big bricks under it and a metal apron in front of it.”



“We didn’t know until we got into these yurts and it was too late that they don’t have an emergency exit. You can’t get out the windows because they’re covered. So I was going to ask them to cut a frame around at least one of the windows in future. Then if it burns here you can get out over there. But these are extremely dangerous and very dry. We did have also two or three fires just by brushing past a candle and somebody’s clothes caught on fire two or three times.”



“We had actually asked the caretakers originally to always have two people on the land in case of an emergency, because we figured there’d be one driver and one person to do the CPR or artificial respiration. That was my original idea: that one person would be driving and one person would be taking care of the person if necessary. But I guess it depends on how many people are in retreat and stuff like that. You can’t have two people care taking for one retreatant only.

“It might be good to clear a helicopter area in advance and everybody should know where it is, in case you have a very serious thing where a helicopter has to come in.”



“I think you should be very conservative with fires. So many Dharma places have burned down—I don’t even know. Was it the nunnery in France—Vajrayogini? Burnt down completely. Somebody left a butter lamp out. His Holiness almost died when a tent burned down from butter lamps in Bodhgaya. I think Lama Zopa was there. It was a huge tent and it just went up in five minutes. All the *thangkas* were burned and stuff like that. So I think you’ve got to be very conservative and strict with open fires incense—things like that.

“We had some very definite fire rules when we started the retreat. And one of them was that underneath any flammable object you have a one-foot diameter plate. That’s really important. We kept that the whole three-year retreat for candles and lamps. It’s really important to have a big plate with sand under it.

“Something that happened in our Dharma Centre in New York is that when you put too many tea lights close together they conflagrate. So don’t put too many tea lights close together. Not everybody knows that. One of my yoga teachers last month had this happen to her house. She had a row of tea lights and they just ignited they just set each other off. So keep tea lights apart from each other—just from experience we’re telling you don’t do that.

“At the beginning we had modest little fire extinguishers. And we tested them out on a real fire—which was really important, because you look at them and you’re like, ‘Well I think I know how to use that.’ It’s really good to be near a fire, to pull the pin and squeeze the extinguisher and see the stuff come out, and just know what it’s going to be like. For me it was really reassuring because I’ve always looked at fire extinguishers going ‘I think I could do it.’ You’ve just got to squeeze the handle. Before you go into retreat get the size extinguisher that’s going to put out the fire because the first ones that we had were tiny little things. They would put out something in a teacup maybe but they wouldn’t put out a decent sized fire so then we got bigger ones. And that’s really important to have.”



“We had a carbon monoxide alarm for those of us who had propane appliances in our home. And that’s really important because a couple of us have experienced them going off at one o’clock in the morning when you’re about to get poisoned. And it’s really important to just to know that the carbon monoxide level’s high so you can open the door. So have that.

“I was thinking it was battery powered because we don’t have electricity. I don’t know if they have smoke alarms that are the same but I think it would be really really valuable to have that. If a mouse comes into your house and knocks a tea light off that one-foot plate onto your cloth walls of your felt yurt it would be really useful to have a smoke alarm. Not that you’re going to be living in a felt yurt but it’ll save your life and it would just be really great to have.”



“Something that would have been good for us is that if we all had first-aid lessons because I don’t know CPR. I don’t know first-aid. I would have felt so much better if I’d known what to do when someone’s got a big cut or if someone’s having a breathing problem. If I’d just been in a class I would have felt so much better. One of my determinations is that right after retreat I’m going to get a first-aid class, because it’s just something when you’re living in an isolated place with people you never know what’s going to happen. You really don’t, so I would recommend that you do that.”

## **Non-violence:**

“I wanted to talk a little bit about *ahimsa*—non-violence. Geshe la and I are very attached to milk products. We love them very much. It was very difficult for us—especially milk tea—he loves it—to give it up. But really when you’re in a retreat, it becomes very clear to you exactly the karmic repercussions of every single action that you’re doing, because time slows down and you’re able to think about it more. Like the way that you pick up a cup—you can see things in the way that you pick up a cup that you wouldn’t normally pay attention to. And if you’re eating food that was gotten through some violent means it’s not going to give you the concentration that you’re looking for. Doing something with violence is counter-productive to building up concentration. It actually inhibits it. That became rather clear.

“This kind-of goes along with the next topic about the bugs—being careful where you’re walking so that you don’t step on your little anthill friends. You have to start getting really really meticulous about your behavior. And you start realizing that most of your normal behavior is a little bit violent. And that’s why all the animals in the desert are scared of us because we’re constantly projecting this violence in our every motion: just the way that we stomp through things without looking to see if little other creatures are below our feet. We’re killing things while we walk.

“You start thinking about the Jains and how they’re sweeping the ground as they walk. It starts to make sense to you. It starts to not become such an obsessive behavior and actually becomes kind of smart behavior, because you really are trying to counter this almost inherent violent tendency in a human being. Because we’re like the dominant force on earth right now, we think we can get away with murder and cruelty. That came up for me a lot. And so I’m really glad that I’m not eating meat especially when Mooey [*note: there were range cattle at the retreat site*] comes to the door and asks for food. You’re looking at her big brown eyes... there’s no ‘him’s’ left because they killed them all.

“And you’re seeing the little babies that come. They have little ‘terminate’ signs on their ears. And you’re thinking, ‘God I don’t want a steak if it means his life.’ It’s something that starts to come up and it’s something that I think is really beneficial to your practice to have these kinds of thoughts. It really starts to purify your heart. And it’s coming from food a lot because most of the other stuff that you do in retreat is not particularly damaging. You’re not driving a car. But food unfortunately in America is got through violence—something that maybe we should work on”

## **Animal visitors**

“There’s a great ancient Sanskrit yoga text about the retreat place and what it should be like; what the building should be like; how the fence should be made; how the water should be; how the food should be. In one place it says, ‘Watch the bugs.’ It’s interesting because you can tell this guy really did retreat. The extraordinary thing about this particular text is that the guy obviously did long retreats and then he wrote his book. And he was adamant—no pests inside the retreat house. You’ve got to make your retreat house pest-proof. He was very adamant about it.

“So I think the place must be bug-proof, mouse-proof, snake-proof, scorpion-proof, etc. Screens on the windows, screens on the doors; don’t think you can get away without a screen door that closes well. You need one that closes well.

“And we didn’t allow any outside people to come in at all. No one came into our three-year retreat *tsam* until about a week ago, and so we did all our own repairs. We did everything ourselves. So what I mean is you’ve got to make sure that if you’re not handy the place should be mouse-proofed before you get into it.”



“Watch for fleas and ticks—they’re hard to get rid of. Once fleas get started in a place they’re almost impossible to get rid of. And wild animals have a lot of fleas. If you leave blankets on the ground outside, sit outside, leave blankets and stuff, they’ll get into the blankets. Then you’ll bring them in and then they’ll get into your bed. And they’re almost impossible to get out especially if you’re not killing anything.”

“Have books for the identification of animals and experienced people around who can tell you what things are. We had some really weird critters come in. We had one that looked like a lobster. We didn’t know what it was. And we had to write is this thing poisonous? Is it going to kill us?”

“Some spiders came out. They’re blind. They crawl all over you. They can’t bite you, it just scared me to death. If I see one I’m out of here. I’ve got some thing about that. And there was this newt that was near our tent some kind of newt or something—a salamander of some kind, but we didn’t know if it was poisonous or what.

“And there were coach-whip snakes, which are not poisonous and which don’t bite you. Apparently they can cut you, but they don’t have a poison. First one we saw was crawling over her shoulder when we were sitting having breakfast. It was at least eight or nine feet long. And we didn’t know. So it’s good to know. You’ve got to have resources that you can check.”



Animals will come into your house and it’s good to know in advance whether or not they’re poisonous. I had a snake in my house and it wasn’t a poisonous snake. So because I knew that I just kind of opened the door for it and could maintain some semblance of calm.

“So it’s really good to know what’s poisonous what’s not and how to react around creatures. For instance when I was in California there was a big mountain lion problem and people would occasionally be attacked by mountain lions. And they told me if you see a mountain lion stand still and then walk slowly away from the animal. People who were getting attacked were joggers who were running.

“So that was really useful when I did encounter a mountain lion—to just stand really still and then to just walk slowly away. If you don’t know that in advance your natural reaction is very likely one that will get you severely hurt or killed. So it’s really good to find out what kind of behaviour you should maintain around dangerous animals potentially dangerous animals.”

“Also I think just practically if you put a lot of cookies outside your yurt the ants will have no reason to come inside your yurt, because they’ll have plenty of food out there. They won’t bother you so much. And we didn’t really have many problems. We had one small ant problem during the last summer but that was it.

“We also found that keeping our food outside in trash cans or in tins inside trash cans worked pretty well. We used to have cookies for offerings on the altar, but once we had our ant problem we switched to “jelly-bellies” which they don’t like, and that was very helpful. Because they’re not interested in them at all. They don’t really smell from the outside. You have to bite into them first, and even when you bite into them, they’re not

that attracted to them. They're attracted to things like dead moths. So you have to watch that too.

"Geshe la's method for getting rid of all very disgusting animals like little centipedes and other things we couldn't identify was just to put them in a jar and give them to the care ladies. And then listen to when they come and open the food box [laughs]. Anyway, we had a lot of fun."



"I just have a really brief thing to say. There's one thing I think was helpful in my yurt. It felt like mine was a lot more secure than the Mongolian ones. The only time I had a problem was when I left the door open by mistake when I went out to make tea or something. I didn't seem to have the large animal problems, so that was no big deal.

"The first summer I was completely invaded by kissing bugs. They're these little black things with red heads that kind of just crawl all over you. They come at night and they come in through the dome. They come down. And they bite you at night. They bite you when they crawl all over you. That was really intense. And that's when I got a mosquito net.

"Actually Amber gave me her tent. I was sleeping inside the tent inside my yurt because it was just too much. It was like I would take out a hundred every night in my jar. It was just really intense. For me it was mostly just that. And it wasn't that bad the last two summers. But a mosquito net and Avon "Skin So Soft" is the best thing I found. I mean I've used eucalyptus and citronella essential oil mixed in with hand lotion but then Elly got this Avon "Skin So Soft". I would just put that on before bed and get in my mosquito net and that seemed to work. That was the only thing.

"I had ant invasions too. The only thing you can do for that—I did the same thing. I put this Avon "Skin So Soft" around the legs of tables that they'd climb up. They wouldn't climb up. Like if they're getting into your altar or something just take like a cotton ball and swab it in the stuff and just make like a little circle all the way around wherever they're climbing. They won't cross it.

"Sometimes they'll just go for the water-bowls on your altar and drown. And you're constantly fishing ants out of your water-bowls. But if you just put this stuff and swab around the legs of the tables—I did it to my bed and it really worked because they were invading my bed in the middle of the night and biting me on the eyelids. But those were the only things in terms of animals.

"And so I'd just do that as a preventative thing. It doesn't kill them. You just kind of find out where their path is that they're going on and swab the stuff around so that they can't get across it. And that works really well. So that's all; just a couple of things about insects."



"Remember to pierce the jar tops before you put critters in jars to be delivered so they can breathe. I think if you don't talk of course you'll see a lot more animals. And I think that was the trick to getting a lot more friends. In this particular place in this desert you need to learn about rattlesnakes: their habits, what they look like, what isn't

a rattlesnake, what's a garden snake. And what we didn't know but we learned is that they hunt in the dusk mostly and at night mostly. And if you attract animals to your yurt by feeding or putting out water that will attract more rattlesnakes. They hunt at dusk because mice come out at dusk—because the mice know they can't be seen very well then, but they can still see. And you have to be really careful then because there's no way you can see the snakes.

“So what we did was we stayed on our deck in the dusk, and we had pathways that we spread white gravel on so we could see better if there was a snake and where we could step off of our deck and know that we wouldn't surprise a snake. They only bite you I think if you surprise them or if you threaten them.

“Expect a lot more bugs in the summer. That's a pattern we didn't know about but they just escalate when the weather gets warm. You might freak out and worry about it. Then they disappear.

**Flies:**

“I think dealing with flies is a very important issue for a meditator. I know Ora la immediately started using a mosquito net, which is a very good idea when you're meditating. I tried to teach everybody Khen Rinpoche's method of catching them in cups. If we hadn't had that, we would have gone crazy. In the height of summer we might take out fifty in a day. We've counted a hundred even. I think it's a very necessary skill to have for a retreatant. Learn how to take flies out. Learn how to keep the mosquito net in place.”

**Mice:**

Oh and be sure to use live traps for the mice. Learn how to trap a mouse—a very important skill. We found the little tiny traps were the most effective, that they like peanut butter above all else, and they're pretty good on cookies. They don't like cheese like everybody thinks. And get them out fast. We had one die on a hot day inside the trap and felt very bad about it.

And the big traps don't work. The little tiny ones—I don't know how you call them [*Note: Havahart*] hand size—they do work.”



“One thing I wanted to say about the mice is that they have a really good sense of direction. So if you really really don't want them to come back and you have sort of an open yurt that allows mice in, you probably have to take them a good distance away so that they don't come back. Then there's the problem of taking them away from their home. Maybe they have a family or something. So really the best solution is just to make sure that your yurt is as sealed as one of those American yurts. And you can do it. We did it.

“I mean, that's much more responsible than taking some poor animal so far away from their home that they have to totally adapt to a new environment way over there.”

## Animal friends

“Generally we found something very interesting was that the animals were much more friendly than I ever thought. I was brought up in Arizona as a boy scout, as a son of a hunter, and we were taught that wild animals were dangerous. They would give you rabies. You should never get near them. You should shoot them if you could. I was brought up that way. Like if I killed a rattlesnake I was praised.

“And Christie didn’t know anything about wild animals. And she’s like feeding the skunks by hand, feeding Mooey by hand, feeding the mice by hand, feeding the rabbits by hand, getting very close to the coyotes, like within three feet sometimes. And then I’m like freaked out. The first time a coyote came in he wandered around. I was all freaked out. I was like he’s going to attack us.

“What I found out was they’re normally quite friendly and considerate. Like the rabbit when he eats out of your hand is very considerate not to bite you. And the squirrel he’ll put his teeth around your finger then he’ll let go. He’s just testing to see if it hurts you. If you’re calm and friendly and have totally peaceful intentions to them they sense it and they don’t hurt you. So I think that’s good to know for people who are going into retreats in the wild.

“So I’d say learn to treat the animals as equals. They have equal rights to this place. They were here before we were. They’ll be here after we leave.



“Budget for feeding the animals and stuff like that. I think it’s a very healthy distraction. I know we’re going to get into distractions later. And I think feeding them is a great practice in meditation. I think it’s very good for your practice. We have a whole schedule; we go out three or four times a day at certain times. Animals are very punctual. And we feed them at the same times. You should have some water around. At first I found the birds a little distracting because of the noise but then I got used to it. So you’ve got to think about that.

Try not to harm animals constructing your retreat place. And I heard Lama Zopa on tape. He gave a very beautiful talk about non-violence. And he started with the animals that had probably been killed when they built the temple he was talking in. And I thought that was very powerful.”



“Like Geshe la said, we had some pretty remarkable experiences with wild animals. And I think that I personally contributed to our practice of non-violence because it all started happening after we started thinking about our diet in that way. I think animals are incredibly sensitive and that they feel your intentions. And I think that as you get more peaceful in your retreat they’ll start to feel more comfortable with your presence and actually start being drawn to your presence if you start creating a really nice space. So I’d like to think that that’s what happened.

"I'd also like to reiterate that the animals here were here before us and will be here after us. It's their home that we are borrowing. We should be really grateful to them for letting us stay here.

"I think that the whole place that you're staying in has sort of an energy about it and all the animals in a certain way are connected. Maybe you could call it like the spirit of the place or whatever, but it's very important to acknowledge and give respect to the place that you're staying. And I think that the offerings we made to them were very important to create respect back for us. You know.



"See the animals as special. We tried to see them as holy beings as maybe protectors or even high beings and we tried to relate to them in that way and I think that's a very good way to relate to them.



"We found out that if you leave a water-bowl out it's good to put little sticks in it so they can crawl out when they get stuck in it. A friend of mine up north in Arizona has a water tank and he has escape logs going into the tanks so that squirrels that fall in stuff like that can get out.



### **Pets**

"A quiet pet may be helpful for a person with bad *lung* I think to overcome the trouble. I think honestly you shouldn't have a barking animal or something like that—it would bother other people—but if a person was alone and if they were getting into bad episodes of *lung*—I think you know we have a rabbit now who's full-time. And he takes away a lot of our tension and anxiety. It just changes the whole level of the tension and anxiety level of being in retreat so long. So I think under certain conditions for certain people a quiet animal might be good."



"Geshe la mentioned that maybe to have a quiet pet would be good for people. I had one for about a month. About the quietest pet you could possibly have—a baby rabbit. It's amazing how distracting it was for me just having another living being in my yurt. Even though it wasn't demanding at all of attention or anything, but it just would always pull my mind away, just knowing that there was another being there. I didn't expect that. I thought, 'It's a rabbit. It's no big deal.' But it really took my mind away and took me to this much more surface level that I had previously been in before the baby rabbit.

"I had wild pets that I really loved and fed by hand. I had a squirrel and one of the Mexican Jays that would eat off my hand and of course the cows. But I found even having outside pets, even though I really enjoyed them, were a distraction.

"I remember once I was just really really deep in retreat and all the cows came to visit. And I took Wonder Bread and fed them all. It was so distracting even just feeding the

cows and I just noticed. I had been in this really deep place and I was getting ready to take a break anyway and they all came over and we hung out for ten minutes or something and I went back in. It just changed my whole trip. Like it was really shocking to me how just an interaction like that with another living being could be so distracting.

“So for me like when I would want to go really really deep I would not even go outside when the cows came. Even that would pull me out—any kind of interaction with another being at all. And I would avoid it especially the ones that I knew would like to be scratched under the chin.

“I would just say, it depends on what kind of retreat you’re doing, but if you’re doing one where you would have the tendency to go really really deep into some state, whether it’s a deity yoga or if you’re doing *shamata* retreat, I would definitely say don’t have pets and be careful even about what you befriend. If there’s something that you’re going to have to worry about feeding every day or something that’s going to come knock on your door or show up or something, I think for a lot of retreats that’s probably not so great, even though I enjoyed it so much to have animals outside to feed. But I had to be really careful to judge where I was in my meditation or else it would be really distracting.”



“Last thing is that from the caretaker’s point of view they really take emergencies seriously all the time. We’ve only had one really kind of deadly encounter. For three years it’s been pretty calm, but they still take it very seriously. And that’s really reassuring to know that they do that. There’s always someone on the land. They would never just blow that off and leave. They would never just say, ‘Oh an emergency’s not going to happen for these two hours that I need to go to the store. It’s two o’clock in the afternoon, nothing could happen.

“That’s not their attitude. Their attitude is one of complete total responsibility for our safety and complete understanding that anything can happen at anytime of the day. Whenever they go somewhere they leave a note on their door saying, ‘Caretaker is here.’ If there’s one caretaker on the land and they happen to be not in one of the two places that we agreed that the caretakers would be, they leave a note. It’s just so precious to know that they take our safety seriously.”

*Homework: What would be the specs for a perfect retreat house for you personally? What materials would you use, especially in this environment? What would you need to take into consideration in the design? Think about it and make a list and a design.*