



THE ASIAN CLASSICS INSTITUTE



DIAMOND MOUNTAIN UNIVERSITY

The Wisdom of Solitude Preparing for Long-term Retreat

Reading Three: Qualities and skills of caretakers

Geshe Michael: There was a famous incident where Lord Atisha's cook — I think you all know this story — went to Lord Atisha and complained about another student who was getting more study time than him, because he was cooking. And then Lord Atisha touched him on the head and said, "I'm going to do a check of who's more spiritually advanced." Then he said, "The cooking is making you more spiritually advanced than the guy who is spending all his time reading books."

The essence of caretaking: serving others

Faith

"The text says faith—you should have true faith in this practice. And I have found that that's probably the most important thing. I think if they have real faith in the practice then you can feel it."



"I think if they have real faith in the practice then you can feel it when you're doing retreat. They should thoroughly understand why you're going into retreat. What you're trying to get out of it; the importance of taking that step. They should really have a deep appreciation for it and they should have a lot of faith in it."



"I think also that the most important thing for a care person to have is faith in both the people who are doing retreat and in the practices. Without that I think you can feel it—you get into a really, really sensitive place when you're doing deep retreat and you can feel people's thoughts and emotions. And it goes into the food that they're cooking. We were very lucky to have people with such great faith and people had so much love, you know, just pouring out of the food all the time. It was so amazing. Just such a great gift you know every single day.

“And during some of the harder days it was like the only good thing that happened that day was the care ladies. I mean, oh my god, thank god for the carers, you know. They sent me that little heart in the basket and I almost cried because that’s the, you know, the best thing that happened last week.”

Retreat

“I think the other great thing about our caretakers is that they were actually doing retreat themselves. So they got to see what it’s like to be on the receiving end of caretaking. And I think that experience is invaluable for a caretaker. And the fact that they are getting that experience during our retreat was great because then they had to face what it was like if you didn’t get something, or if you needed it, or if you had a problem. So I think the kind of empathy that they learned from being a retreatant was very important. So I think rotating them was a good idea and I think the fact they were going in retreat was very important.”



“It’s really important to have people who understand you. And I think that them doing, not only doing a retreat, but doing the same practices that we’re doing, following Ngulchu Dharmabadhra’s text the same as we were and being sort of like retreatants themselves. It made it more like a community to me and less like, you know, they’re on one side and we’re on the other but more like we’re all in this together. We all have these same experiences.”



“I think it’s an advantage if the care people have done a retreat before because this can only help our experience and enhance their duties.”

Organization

“They should be organized. They’re getting notes from five or six retreatants. They’re all, like, different and they all have their special needs. I think they all have to be highly organized out there.”

Finances

“They have to be a good shopper, which is difficult. I did it for eight years. You have to be cost conscious, but you have to buy the best things.”

Cooking

“I think they should be a good cook. I think food is extremely important for retreat. That’s something we learned. And I think individualized food is important on retreat. So they should be a good cook. And I think they should also be creative about their cooking. I think they should run out and get a cookbook. Like, if they hear that somebody’s going vegan they should go out and get a vegan cookbook and try out dishes on them. And get responses. And be responsive to the feelings of the people.

“Obviously, a person who can’t cook very well should not be cooking. We had good caretakers that way but I think if the food had been consistently bad, which I’ve seen in some retreat centers, it would have seriously affected the retreat. And at that point you keep thinking about it.”



“Really the only quality to avoid is someone who’s sending you bad vibes. If they have frenetic energy, it’s really disturbing. On the other hand, you can have some of the simplest food but if it has love in it, it gives you warmth and it’s just calming. If the caretakers put love into the food it doesn’t matter how simple it is. It just tastes so good because of what went into it.

“And really, to me, the food probably is second or third or fourth or last priority to that because the way the food tastes changes depending on who cooks it—no matter, even if it’s the same exact dish.”

Discretion

“The caretaker should be discreet. When you get into retreat you don’t want everyone knowing your business. You want to be able to have a nervous breakdown and tell them and know that it’s not going to spread throughout the email system in a week. You know what I mean? They should be just cool people. Discretion is a very rare trait in America, I mean someone who can say, ‘Well maybe I shouldn’t speak about what this person is going through because they wouldn’t want me to.’ And I think discretion is a good quality in a caretaker.

“The caretaker must be aware that a single word in a note can flip you out for a week. And it’s just like they just mentioned—something like a single word—and you’ve got to understand, as a caretaker, that that can flip the retreatant out for a week. Even the way you word notes should be very well thought out and it doesn’t reveal anything about what’s going on.”



“Everything that comes to you in retreat really affects you—whether it’s food, clothing, or whatever you get. The energy is different from usual, so it is vital that you should really know your caretaker before you go into retreat. The person who’s caretaking should have a concept of the sacredness of the retreat boundary and that it’s inviolable, and that nothing should go—is supposed to go—in and out.”

Availability

“The most important quality of all is availability. You need caretakers who are willing and able to stay for three years. And that’s very rare to have someone to take three years out of their life to serve somebody else, up here especially. So I think obviously the first thing to check with a caretaker would be are you really going to be available? Can you honestly say you can stay here for three years? And we were amazingly

blessed that we had three people—the core—who could commit and did commit to three years.”



“You should arrange a back-up caretaker. I think we’ve been fortunate that we’ve had people that have served us that we don’t know and that our staff has made all these arrangements for us to have beautiful people to serve us. But I think if I had to do it all over again and I was advising somebody, I would like them to have that decision ahead of time as to who was going to be the back-up. So I think it’s a vital thing to arrange a back-up before you go in.”

Compassion

“I think they should be compassionate. I mean, people in retreat have emergencies. They have problems. They have crises. And a caretaker should be patient and compassionate.”

Flexibility

“I think they should be flexible. They have to be able to deal with a lot of neurotic changes. Like we would send out a note every three days that we didn’t want the food we asked for three days before anymore—that they had driven to Tucson to get for us. We would say, ‘No we don’t want soy milk, we want oat milk.’ And they’d do oat milk. And then maybe they’d buy ten things of it and we’d say, ‘No way, it doesn’t work for us. Could you go back to goat’s milk?’

“And I think especially when you’re in retreat you get neurotic. You change a lot. You’re very volatile. And I think you’ve got to have caretakers who can smile and feed the soymilk to the cows or something. You know what I mean? You’ve got to have people who are flexible. And I think they’ve had a lot of chance with us, I know, to be flexible because we often changed our diet. We’d say this doesn’t work for us anymore; we need to change it.

“We were lucky that the caretakers took some kind of special interest in our particular food needs. Like we said we didn’t feel we were getting enough of this vitamin and that vitamin. They would actually do a whole research and send me a folder with suggestions. They’d say, ‘We did a research on the web—here’s twenty sources of iron. Which one do you think would be best for you? And then we’ll send it in to you and you can try it out.’

“And they did that, like ten times they’d send in a whole research of some kind of food. Because we also dropped dairy at a point in our three-year retreat, so we were freaking out about were we getting enough protein or would my bones fall apart. We didn’t know because we’ve lived on dairy our whole lives. So they were very good to do research and send the research to us.”



“... and they also need to have an enormous amount of flexibility to run when you say run, to stop when you say stop and not to take it personally. I remember in retreat I say, ‘Don’t send me any dinner’, then I say ‘Send me dinner’, then I say ‘Don’t send me any meat at all’, you know. These things come up. It has to be a person that does not react to circumstances but can embrace you.”

Patient

“Another quality that the caretaker needs is patience. They have to be very familiar with the six perfections. You should give them a patience test or something because you change while you’re in retreat and there are some days you are totally crazy. It would be nice to have a person you could bond to, and say, ‘I’m going crazy, could you change my diet?’ It’s very important that they are patient, because you change. You go beyond places that you never even imagined before you go into retreat, so you can’t say I’m going to be crazy. You don’t know, so the person just has to be very patient with you.”

Joyful

“And another thing that they really need is to have the quality of joyful effort. They must be happy. Because if they’re not happy...”

Strict

“One of the caretakers especially helped us a lot in being strict with us. Like we would ask for something that we shouldn’t really have at that point and they would actually write in and say, ‘At the beginning of the retreat you said that you didn’t want this kind of thing. Now are you sure that that’s what you really want?’

“I mean, you’ve got to have a caretaker who’s got good sense and they can be a little tough with you when they think that you might need it. You know, like you might ask to send this letter to this person and you want replies back from two people. And then they write to you and say, ‘At the beginning of the retreat you said that you didn’t want to do that. Now you sure you want to do that?’ So I think you need someone who can be a little tough guy with you also but in a compassionate way.”

Consistent

“They should be on time with what they do, and our caretakers were incredible. I’ve never, I don’t believe I’ve ever had a single late meal. It’s been over two thousand meals for us. And I can tell you from business, that’s just an extraordinary logistical feat not to have one screw up in two thousand meals—where you didn’t run over—is unbelievable.”



“One thing though that nobody’s sort of mentioned explicitly, that I experienced, was how important consistency was for me on two levels. One was consistency in terms of food. Like when you had a special diet and have special needs and there was a lot of turnover and they needed to ask a lot of extra people to help. I totally understood that, but at certain times, it just felt like there was a lot of inconsistency. Like sometimes

you'd get five times as much as you could eat one day and not nearly enough the next day. And then the next day you got all the things that you didn't like that everybody else knew about but that obviously the person helping that day didn't know about. And sometimes it was just kind of wildly inconsistent and that was just really hard. It was just really hard both ways because it just made you feel really up in the air, like what's going on out there?

"One day I got all the things that I don't eat and the cows got all my food. And then it just makes you feel like, 'Well what's going on out there?' It's not only that you don't get to eat lunch. That's part of it. But then emotionally you're just like well, wow, what's the deal?"



"I wanted to add just one more thing about caretakers. What started to happen after some period of time—I don't know when it was—was that they all started getting other jobs in addition to taking care of us. Like they all started teaching a lot and doing secretarial things and getting busy with other projects. And I noticed, it felt to me... I talked a little bit last time about consistency, and I guess this relates to that. Like it helped to have at least one who's only priority and only job was taking care of us, because when they all started getting involved with all these other projects, it felt like things got inconsistent. You'd ask for things and the person you'd asked on Tuesday wouldn't be back at work again until next Monday because they had all these other things to do. And, if you needed something urgently, I don't know what happens out there in terms of requests and notes and stuff. And then I think when the fourth one was added, and that was like his only job, things got real consistent again. Like you'd ask for something, the next day it would appear.



"So I think that would be good to think in terms of what jobs need to be done for the overall center, and make sure that the people who are taking care of the retreaters aren't too involved with all of these other tasks, because it makes things a little inconsistent. It adds to the feeling that you're just not sure who to ask or who's too busy with other stuff. And then you start to feel bad to ask some specific person for a favor because you don't know if they can do it, or if they're even there. It's like, from our side, when I'd ask somebody for something and get a note that said they weren't going to be around for two months, could somebody else do it. It just makes you feel a little up in the air. So I think that's important."

Stable

"I think the most crucially problem thing in a caretaker is someone who is not stable. You know, someone who is having their own nervous problems, or their own doubts, or they need to talk to somebody, or something like that, or to get any kind of vibes. I mean, caretakers should understand that we can feel vibes. So they shouldn't give you any kind of nervous vibes or unsure vibes or anything like that. And they should never mention any kind of problems. You should never get a note saying we don't have enough money, we just ran out of money, or such-and-such a problem has happened in the world, and that kind of thing. Our caretakers were quite good on that.

“When you go into a retreat you get extremely sensitive to the energy that’s going into the food. And so the most important thing is just to try and prevent people who are mentally unstable, even if it’s one of the caretakers, that they are having an episode, it’s really important to remove them from the service for that period of time until they can heal, in order to protect the retreaters.”



“It’s really important that they be spiritually mature and emotionally mature. They have to be very, very stable emotionally because it’s second to being inside a retreat—maybe more than being inside a retreat. It’s an incredibly trying experience—emotionally, spiritually, psychologically, socially—you know. You’re almost as isolated as the retreaters are so you have to be incredibly determined, incredibly mature. You have to have gone through hardships and survived them and be stable as a result of that.”



“The most vital thing is the person has a good character, is spiritually mature, because all of that comes in through the food, and the care basket, and whatever they send. I mean they send their spiritual energy with whatever they send into the retreat border. So it’s really important that the caretakers be able to find other people who are mature in that way.”



“I think the main quality you don’t want somebody to have is mental instability. I have to repeat that for everybody because it’s so... I’ll just tell a little anecdote of my experience with mental instability in a cook. I was in a Dharma center one time and one of the cooks was going through an incredible, I guess disillusionment and cynicism in their practice, and they were the cook. One day they made a chocolate cake and, you know, they left it in the middle of the kitchen. And it was this beautiful chocolate cake, and it looked like it was there for everybody, but when I took a piece of it and tasted it—it tasted like poison because the person was so disturbed. It tasted like poison. I felt like I’d eaten poison. And this is, like, an amazing cook. But their mental disturbance poisoned the food. So it happens. It sounds unlikely but it happens. You can feel it. When you go into a retreat you get extremely sensitive to the energy that’s going into the food. And so the most important thing is just to try and prevent people who are mentally unstable, even if it’s one of the caretakers that is having an episode, it’s really important to remove them from the service for that period of time until they can heal, in order to protect the retreaters.”

Neat

“They should be neat. It was nice to get a basket and it was all neat and clean, and the cloths were nice, and everything was shiny and everything is bright—you see what I mean—just bright and neat and happy. That was very important to us. To open up the basket and it looked so attractive all the time. It was so neatly packed and nicely thought out and things like that.”

Impartial

“They should be impartial, meaning that they should treat each retreatant the same because if one retreatant starts getting a feeling that they’re being shorted—they make a request for something and they say, ‘Oh we can’t do that...’

“And then they know some other retreatant that happens to be friends with them or happens to be their Lama, is getting the things they’re asking for. Then I think that can create an extra emotional stress on the retreatants. I think it’s very important for a care person to be very impartial. That’s also a big deal in *vinaya*. *Vinaya* treats a lot of these issues that will come up in a community such as Diamond Mountain or in a group retreat. So I hope to cover two huge *vinaya* texts with everybody later on during the translative process.”

Determined

“They should be determined. They should really be determined.”

A good communicator

“I want to say that I think a caretaker should have communication skills with the outside support, like sponsors and the director. They should have skills not only with the retreatants, but they should have big time skills with the outside people who are sponsoring or who are visiting. They’ve got to be able to go to the airport, pick somebody up, be very diplomatic, give them a flower, you know—be respectful, make them feel at home. I remember when I went to travel to other centers how much the first person I met—I didn’t know what Vajrapani was, you know. And the first person I met... you know, however they act towards you determines a lot of how you going to experience your visit.

“They’ve got to have skills with the outside as well as with the inside. And maybe email skills and stuff like that are important.”

Practical

“I think they’ve got to have practical skills. We didn’t mention that. I mean they’ve got to know how to use a hammer and they’ve got to know how to paint something, and get up on a ladder on somebody’s roof because their skylight blew off and they’re damn cold. *[laughter]* You know what I mean?

“Even if they don’t have those skills they should be someone who’s got the gumption to say, ‘Okay I don’t know how to use a chainsaw but just give it to me,’ you know what I mean? They’ve got to be somebody who’s got the courage to jump in.”



“In our corporation we had a book from the chairman of Sony. His big thing was to give your customer more than they dreamed. Give your customer a feature on this new car, or this new stereo, that they didn’t even think about yet. Spend all your time sitting there in your yurt going, ‘What can I offer to these people that they’re not even asking

me for yet?' You see what I mean? And that's a very good attitude. In business it's a wonderful attitude to have and, I think, for a caretaker."

Diplomatic

"In retreat, I think our management must have skills of diplomacy, must be able to make all the retreaters feel good although they're not getting what they want. It's just like being discreet. So I think if you're planning a retreat please try to talk about issues of diplomacy, talk about issues of discretion, talk about areas of diplomacy, talk about areas of discretion because diplomacy is key. It is a kind of skill that doctors learn to tell their patients that somebody has died. It's something that clergy learn to deal with students to tell them bad news. So it's this kind of skill that is greatly needed by management who are caring for a retreat. Not only with financial issues but, with all issues it's good to have diplomacy."



"Also I wanted to say something about the effect of a single stray word in a note. The caretaker must be aware before they begin care-taking that a single word in a note can flip you out for a week? And it's just like they just mentioned something, like a single word, and you've got to understand, as a caretaker, that that can flip the retreatant out for a week. Even the way you word notes should be very well thought out not to reveal anything about what's going on."



"Another adjustment for me was not getting my requests filled. During retreat, as early as within the first six-month period, I received notes from management stating we do not have any funds for this item. I received a total of six notes during my entire three-year retreat, even this last retreat when I requested art supplies. This can cause some repercussions in your retreat. You start to wonder about the stability of the management and if you're able to continue your three-year retreat.

"It also can create positive effects on your mind. For me, it put me back into my memories of the ghetto, struggling within my soul to get out of the ghetto. It actually gave me energy and power to stay in the retreat. It gave me an amount of determination to say, 'Oh if I don't get what I want it doesn't matter. I'm staying regardless'. So for me, it had a positive effect, but it can also have some negative effects.

"But I have to say honestly, because it's to help people, I have had statements like, 'we don't have any money,' you know, come into me in retreat. I'm saying this because I want to help, not because I'm saying that it's wrong or right. But it is very, very essential that the person has diplomacy. It is key that they should have diplomacy. And they should care what affects you. You should not be involved with the running of the retreat or the office or who's coming or going. That's very distracting."

Nurturing

"It's great if they're nurturing. You know, when you get this real nurturing energy in our food basket, we just feel like we've got all these mothers out there. And that's just a terrific energy to have. You know, it's a kind of sweet, motherly energy."



“The thing that most amazed me about the caretakers is the little special touches that Geshe la mentioned before. You know, even after three years they’re still putting little decorations on the food baskets. They’re still making the extra efforts to put a little finishing touch on things. And they just have this creativeness. It’s really creativity that they have. And they take a lot of interest in being creative about the way that they’re serving us. They don’t just kind of slap some food in the food basket. All the food’s wrapped up with little baby bundles with flowers in there, little toys.

“They found out we were interested in Harry Potter so they sent us Harry Potter toys. You know, they really take an interest in making us feel special. And they don’t ever just get bored with it. There’s never been a ‘boredom’ vibe coming through the food basket. And it’s just unbelievable that they can do that. That’s an incredibly special quality that they have. I don’t know how they do it, but that’s something you should look for in a caretaker.”

Supportive

“I think the most important function that the caretakers serve for me was more of support. You know, it was like they are out there, and I would just feel like slacking off, and I’ll be like, ‘No’, you know, ‘The carers are out there and they believe in me, you know, they believe me’

“And I keep getting messages like, ‘You are a super hero; you are awesome,’ you know. And I am completely a loser. They believe in me. Like these people believe in me and that came through in everything. I mean, it came through in the food, it came through in the very food baskets—that you would take the time to put little bows on them and all those little special things that you did—it came through in everything, but the main, kind of the root of all of that was that faith that you had, like a conviction that you had that I am no body but like I was so worth your faith.

“And I just like, I really believe that the way the other people see you, they are willing to kind of go with it and say, ‘You’re super hero; you are going to do it.’

“Then you just do it, and that really empowers you to do it. And if everybody in the world said you’re loser and you’re not worth anything—you know, I’ve seen people that have been the victim of that, and they just believe it and they never do anything even though they’ve got amazing potential. So you’ve just awakened all this potential through just being here and just through your faith, you know, and just through being willing to encourage me, and preventing me from leaving so many times. I can’t even tell you, so many times, because you believed in me, I got my butt on the cushion. You know, so many times when I was like having this debate with myself about why I didn’t have to meditate today—no, the carers are there and they believe in me and my butt is on the cushion—and it was just because you were there. So I think that... for me that was the most important function”



“If you know the person that is serving you this really helps your retreat. And again as was mentioned two times, the energy is just very important. I was also very sensitive to food and what came through. The energy is tremendously important. I never had this experience before but, during retreat, everything that came in the yurt really affects you – whether it’s food, clothing, a box, whatever you get. That energy is so different so it is vital that I think you should really know your caretaker before you go in retreat.”



“I should reiterate what everybody else has said so far, that the caretakers should really have an appreciation for the nature of the undertaking: that you’re going into a three-year retreat. They should thoroughly understand why you’re going into three-year retreat, what you’re trying to get out of it, the importance of taking that step. They should really have a deep appreciation for it and they should have a lot of faith in it. And they should also—it really helps... a lot of times I would write them a note and they would say, you know, we understand that you’re going through a hard time or you know... I mean they wouldn’t even say it directly. There was no direct communication but they would communicate kind of indirectly that they were very empathetic with the situation that I was in. They had really thought deeply about the difficulties that you face in solitude and the difficulties that you face with trying to do your practice everyday, and trying to deal with your mind everyday. They were really empathetic about it. I think that’s really important that you feel like you’ve got a friend on the outside who’s just fully in support of what you’re doing you know.

“So many days that energy was the only thing that kept me in retreat – was that they’re on the outside, they’re out there, believing in us in here. They just had this unshakeable devotion. Even if I don’t feel like I’m doing such a great job, they’re out there, believing in the retreat, and so that’s a huge encouragement. Just that faith alone has gotten me through, maybe, three years.

“And, I think it’s also really important you know, that they feel a lot of pride in being able to serve such a thing; that they take a special kind of pride in being able to contribute to that. And they don’t have this longing desire to be in the retreat. They have a longing desire to be a caretaker of the retreat. You know, I think that’s really important that they feel satisfied with that position. They don’t feel some kind of dissatisfaction, or longing, or inadequacy, about their position. That they take a lot of pride in what they are doing. And that’s then really great to see that satisfaction in their lifestyle, which is different from our lifestyle.”

A note about transference

“A retreator will often go through a process almost like the kind of transference that you get when you’re in therapy. The caretakers were our only interaction and I found myself getting really like emotionally dependent on them. And that was another thing with the consistency. I remember the first year, the first time Elly sent me a note and said she was going away for three months and I was just like, oh my god, you know. I just found that I had been so emotionally dependent on the idea of her specifically, because she’s the one I knew longest and most and all that stuff. And I found myself just feeling like, you know, this abandonment. I’m like, you know, ‘Who can I ask?’ That happened to me. And then I got a note that was another example of when you

hear too much of what's going on from the outside that disturbs your mind. I got a note saying that two of the people who were core people were leaving. And that disturbed my mind.

"Like, I realized how much I had just been depending on knowing that they were there, like some stability. Oh, you know, they weren't the cooks but they were out there and we had a strong connection. And there was just some emotional stability for me in knowing that they were there. And then when I heard they were gone it was the same thing all over again. And then I'm trying to meditate on impermanence but all of that kept coming up. For me, I really needed a lot more almost emotional consistency, you know. Like the food was half of it and just kind of knowing who's there.

"And also in terms of writing anything that I felt vulnerable about, like writing like I'm freaking out and I need so-and-so, if I didn't know who was getting the note I really hesitated to write. If I knew it was Elly or Anne, or Amber, OK, but if I didn't have any idea who was getting it, I would hesitate to ask for things or to write things, you know, that felt like it was disclosing my mental state or something because I just had no idea. It could be a total stranger. And then they think there's some weirdo doing retreat. Like I wouldn't mind if I knew who it was and I knew that they wouldn't talk about it or whatever, but if I had no idea who it was or if they'd gotten any training about not talking about it, like not telling everybody that you've got *lung* and you're just asking for ten pounds of peanut butter. Knowing it's not going to go out on the broadcast throughout the community, you know.

"Those were the kinds of things that to me were to be almost on an emotional level that I found more upsetting. I mean, like I don't really care what I eat. There's only four things in the world—otherwise I'll eat anything and I won't even remember ten minutes later what it was. But the vibes thing is important, and then just the emotional sort of needing consistency of the people out there. And knowing who's out there if you're going through some sort of an emotional, vulnerable state was what, you know, was important for me."