



THE ASIAN CLASSICS INSTITUTE



DIAMOND MOUNTAIN UNIVERSITY

The Wisdom of Solitude Preparing for Long-term Retreat

Reading four: Nourishment: food, sleep, exercise, support from the outside

*Just how many kinds of sustenance are there?"
There are four different kinds: sustenance in the form of solid food,
contact, mental movement, and consciousness.*

*from the first Dalai Lama's commentary
to the Abhidharmakosha*

Food

"Expect changes in the way your body uses food. It's interesting. I personally get gas and burps and some kind of allergies that I never had before, and I think that's a change in the prana. I think you're getting a lot of charge of extra prana and you don't have the charkas open yet. So you've got more prana but the same room for it to move in. And I think you get burping, or indigestion, or farting, or allergies, and stuff like that, I never had before."



"You need to change your food with seasons, especially quantities. And also I think that having any overweight on your body is bad for all the practices, especially advanced practices. So I think it's very important to start shifting your food as the seasons change. And your want to shift the kinds of food you eat. There's a balance between dull and *lungy*: too much food obviously makes you dull. And of course you'll find out that too little food makes you very *lungy*. We ate too light the first six months. We only had a salad and a soup in the evening and a very small breakfast at noon. We just found if you don't eat enough you get very *lungy* very fast. And we didn't know. So it's good to know.

"You need to adjust your food if you're doing channel work. Any kind of work with your channels and stuff like that you have to be very careful. You have to change your foods. There are lists in the texts on channels and we'll talk about that sometime.

“Stay hydrated, especially in this weather. That also includes hydration of the air. One of our yoga teachers said one contributing factor for *lung* around here could be that the air is so dry, and he suggested putting pots of water on your stove or in the sunlight inside your yurt because he said oxygen doesn’t exchange as well if the air is very dry. And he said that might contribute to *lung*.”



“I had this thing about thinking about dinner or breakfast. We did an interesting thing. We didn’t eat dinner until three or four hours after it was delivered so we didn’t even have the mental option of worrying about should I run out and get the basket and stuff like that. That helps, but personally I was still—I don’t know if it’s my age, when you get to fifty or something—but food is a comfort in a way. I think a lot of people over forty start taking refuge in food because it’s just easy. It’s easier than life; eating is easier than life. It’s comforting. It gives you some kind of mental comfort sometimes. So I think you’ve got to watch that.”



“No sudden changes in your diet. Just because you’re going into retreat don’t think you should change your diet drastically, quickly. You should do it very gradually, especially people who have just gone off meat. It can make you crazy. Don’t pressure yourself. Start lightly but do it.”



“My yoga teacher insisted that we should experiment. Experiment with everything and work out the best way of doing things. Don’t be afraid to experiment. You must experiment with your diet and everything else.”



“Trisangma mentioned a blow-out once a month. Just eat anything you want. We did it on *tsechus*. Like we would order a large amount of offerings and then we’d just blow out afterwards. We’d just eat them all. And what I personally found was that your body—my body—felt great the next day because I think it sucks out of all the junk, like, whatever nutrient Z and G that it needs. For once it has a choice. Usually we just ate enough to get by, just enough for the body to run, but I think that shorts the body on certain nutrients. And then if you just eat a lot, like twice a month, then I could feel the body sucking out the things it didn’t get during the whole month.”



“Twice a day is fine for eating. You don’t need to eat more. That’s a myth too.”

“We are very careful about communicating our likes and dislikes clearly everyday. If we really like something we write it on it, and if we don’t like something we write it on it because they are changing people, necessarily, as people come and go, and as they have other duties to do and their own retreats. So I think constant feedback prevents disappointment of expectations that they didn’t know about. They just don’t know. You have to be constantly clear about what’s good for you and what’s not good for you.”



“We had sort of a debate between ourselves about whether we should ask for food in containers that were just big enough to keep us honest. Like eating just the right amount. And Christie la had an interesting idea. She said, ‘Just let them deliver what they deliver, and we develop our control.’ I would have said, ‘We’ll never eat more than this bowl, and you keep this bowl, and you always deliver food in this bowl.’ She said, ‘Let them deliver what they want, and then we learn self-control.’ In the end, that turned out to be better although it was harder for me.”

“To avoid eating too much, don’t keep food in the house, and set a rule for how many bowls of food you can have per day and how big. If you don’t eat enough, try to think about how it might give you *lung* or make you tired, and you won’t be able to help people later. If you have a problem with eating sweets, don’t have any, and don’t use sweets on the altar. If you have a problem such as eating when you feel sad or lonely, paradoxically you may find it easier to break this habit if you do a gentle fast every once in a while for twenty-four hours. It forces you to confront the urge to eat. If you get nasal or head congestion, cut down on dairy, and make sure your chimney is not smoking into the yurt. Upside-down yoga positions head below chest help a lot.”



“The Vinaya is very strict about not storing food in your house and now we know why. If you have it there you’re probably going to snack and then that ruins your meditation and makes you sleepy. You just tend to get too heavy. And so I think, unless you have incredible self-control, which I don’t have, it’s just better to have really, really, emergency, emergency. Like we kept a jar of nuts around for emergencies—in case we got *lung* really bad in between food deliveries.”



“If you’re doing yoga and meditation well then your food desires will change for the better. Especially if you’re doing yoga regularly and nicely then you’ll just, naturally, want to eat more healthily.”



“It’s the healthiest I’ve ever eaten, because you wouldn’t do this for yourself. One of our yoga teachers said the beauty of cooking for someone else is that you make things

you wouldn't make for yourself. And that's really true. I think the caretakers were better to us than we would have been to ourselves."



"We overcame a lot of cultural myths about what was healthy and what was not. Like we figured out iceberg lettuce wasn't doing a thing for anything. And we just stopped it. I was brought up to believe that was really healthy for you.

"We got this craving for spinach. We were writing notes all the time, send us more spinach. They sent us a lot, and we said we want more spinach. I think you've got to listen to your body."



"Stay traditional with cooking. I think Mexican or Indian, they have time-tested, thousands of years tested vegetarian food, and I think that's very good for people who are going vegetarian."

"One of the general foods that we really thought were useful was Indian food, because it's so simple and plain and easy to digest. And what happened to us, and may happen to other people when they're in retreat, is that we noticed that a *bakchak*, a karmic seed, ripened and we had a craving for Indian food. Like we had some kind of past Indian karma I think. And we were just craving Indian food.

So I think you might want to try to get in touch with your own *bakchaks*. You might notice that you have some kind of past life thing. I'm not saying we saw past lives or anything like that. It was just that we felt this strong urge to eat Indian food and it was really good for our retreat."



"Protein craving has already been mentioned. It's very good for your concentration I think. We had a tough time because we dropped animal food, including dairy, and you've got to deal with that.

"We found that spinach was incredible for us. The iron is really good in a natural form. I don't think vitamins—although we took vitamin B12, vitamin C, and we added calcium when we dropped the milk and the dairy—but I believe strongly that if you can get it in the form of the vegetables, it's much better.

"I'm not a nutritionist but I'm just describing what happened to our actual bodies."

"We found out something really cool about popcorn. I like this microbiotic idea that you should eat what's grown in your area and not eat something that's imported from a jungle five thousand miles away. You know what I mean? It just doesn't fit this climate, doesn't fit the vibes of this place. And we found popcorn—and corn is one of the only natural foods around here—really fit our bodies. And we didn't eat any butter on it; we asked them to deliver it plain. And then when you get *lung*, you can eat some popcorn and it's very light, and you don't add extra weight, and you don't get dull. We

just found that it was perfect for when you have *lung*. It brings you down but it doesn't give you any weight. It doesn't ruin your practice."

"In the Vinaya you're allowed to eat sugar often, even in the evening. Like little cubes of natural sugar. We found that if it's natural like that, we found that in the afternoon especially during hot weather, we wanted to do some writing or something, and we would get dull and sleepy because we'd just eaten our big meal of the day by noon. And we found out that the jellybeans were really great. There's a certain kind of jellybean, not the normal ones, which are mostly sugar. There's one called "jelly-belly" which we started eating. And we would eat maybe, fifteen each while we were writing. And apparently they don't have much sugar but they have this, it's enough to pep you up a little bit. I'm not suggesting you eat candy. We tried that. It's like sugar and it brought us that crash afterwards."

"Bad foods for us were very greasy foods—like deep-fried stuff was very bad for us. But I know for some others it's like energy food, and I think everybody's different. We found that too much spicy or too much hot doesn't work out. Especially like pepper—too much black pepper and stuff like that. Some of the ancient yoga texts say that certain kinds of condiments like pickle, or chutney as an aid to digestion if that works for you—but generally too spicy or too hot, didn't work for us.

"Coffee and tea, definitely we stopped. I even got off milk tea, which I have been drinking ever since I met the Tibetans thirty years ago. I drank up to ten, fifteen cups a day. And we gradually weaned ourselves off that. We didn't have any coffee except for holidays. On holidays we did a long practice. From the time we started preparing to the time we finished it could be seven hours. And we just gave it the time. And then we pumped ourselves up with caffeine and that was fine. It worked and we didn't get crazy.

"Any kind of sugar is bad. Any kind of processed sugar is really, really bad, and people should watch that.

"One of the things I found was that nightshade foods are very bad for *lung*. Things like potatoes, tomatoes, they actually exacerbate *lung*—which is something that I wouldn't expect because you'd think that potato is a heavy food, but it's not. After I would eat it, like half an hour afterwards, I couldn't breathe properly. And I couldn't figure it out. And finally I was like—it's the potatoes. These things really have a strong effect on you."



"A regular yoga program can be the solution to problems with digestion, gas, burping, constipation, menstrual cramps, and shoulder pain. Migraines can be a sign of low blood sugar (not eating enough), or of *lung*."



"Something I noticed was that in our culture, it dawned on me that we give treats with food. Like food is a way to tell somebody, 'I like you, there's a special treat.' And we

would get in our baskets sometimes, two or three donuts, something meant as a treat, but it's really bad for retreaters. It's not a kindness. What I mean is you should inform the caretakers that treats of food, which is an American custom, which is what we all grew up with, should be very tiny. The thought is there if you just give a very tiny piece. Sometimes we'd get these huge chocolate bars or something that we could never eat, but then we'd be tempted to eat. What I mean is the gift thing doesn't work when you're in retreat.

"We get urges, for example, if we get a bad note or a note with something in it that makes us nervous, then all we want is potato chips or something like that. It's just nervous eating and that's an American thing too.

"Using food as a treatment for *lung* is a very good idea. Watch what foods—usually heavy, greasy, pasta's very good I think. And watch the foods that are bad for *lung*. Watch out for overeating in reaction to stress or loneliness or things like that."



"Fasting turned out not to be very productive for us in our schedule. But it was a very good experience, the first year, just doing it once a week. I think, in America particularly, people have a very bad relationship to food. Geshe la was saying that they connect it to loving someone else and giving them food, or being social and having food together. You have to break all those social things when you go into retreat. You have to get it so that it's just fuel. It's just using it for your practice and that's it. And that's a little bit hard to do at first. I think it takes about a year actually.

"One of the things that helped with that is the fast. When you're used to eating twice a day and then one day you don't eat, it just breaks something in your mind. It's very good for your discipline, and it makes you think about what your relationship to food is and maybe help change it.

"It's actually really exhausting to be concentrating in meditation or reciting mantras or even yoga concentration for a long period of time. The breaks for food were actually the only external things that we got. So it actually became like this really exciting thing, this fun thing to do. And I think it's kind of dangerous because then you develop this weird relationship to food. Also the fact that someone is coming to your yurt is very exciting. It's like, 'Wow, a new thing that's happening.' I mean, it's like the biggest thing that happens all day is that the care lady is bringing your lunch. And so one thing that we did to stop this immediate Pavlovian drooling as soon as we heard the caretakers was that we didn't run to the food basket and eat it as soon as we got it. We actually scheduled our practices so that we were even waiting three hours or four hours after the food came to eat it.

"So we would have this excitement of the caretakers, but it would be separate from the eating part. And I think that was really important because I think for me, if I had eaten as soon as they got there the whole thing would have been connected. The excitement of the caretakers and the excitement of getting something like a present in your basket, like food was this present, and then eating. And then we broke that. So that was very helpful for me actually.

“Also we decided to have our main meal at night. We did some experiments trying to have our main meal during the day. It didn’t work for us because what happened is we did our heaviest practices from four in the morning til twelve in the afternoon. So what we needed was fuel in the very beginning of the day, and what we found was that if we ate at night, maybe an hour or two before we went to bed, the food would be processed during our sleep and we’d have a lot of energy for our very heavy practices. And then as the day progressed we would do less heavy practices. Also the morning meal—if you make it too heavy you can’t do an afternoon practice, because it’s so heavy that it weighs you down, at least for me. You become so lethargic—especially in 150 degree weather. You really can’t eat a lot in 150 degree weather and then expect to do your translation. It won’t work. So that was very helpful.

“I guess I should just reiterate, it’s really nice to have as little as you possibly can without getting *lung*, and you have to weigh that for yourself, your own body. It’s very nice not to have things in your stomach constantly—our yoga teachers also were mentioning that. It’s nice to work in your meditations on an empty stomach but they also say that you shouldn’t be too hungry because that’ll definitely give you *lung* if you’re doing heavy meditation practices and you’re too hungry. Which is why in the end fasting didn’t work for us, because you know it just kind of throws you off.”



“Pabongka Rinpoche said not to eat or drink during a session. If your mouth is really dry, you can take water, but he discourages you from interrupting your session with food or drink. So finish your session, get up, take a stretch, walk around, and drink something. I personally over the years have gotten into doing some kind of physical thing between sessions. It improves the retreat a lot.”

Exercise

“Physical ways of treating the body help sustain the body. One is taking a nice bath, nice warm bath, medicinal bath, any kind of a nice bath. Another one is rubbing some ointments on your body—those are examples of nourishment. They actually help the elements in your body. And they help nourish your body. I think you could say generally anything that takes care of your body like that—exercise I guess would be nourishment.” *[from ACI course 8 transcript]*



“Exercise is absolutely necessary for good meditation. Do it always with this in mind, that it’s for getting good at these things so you can help others. It’s hard to push yourself all the way in exercise; I suggest just increasing the time you exercise, which has the same effect. Later if exercise is a steady habit, you will find yourself pushing yourself automatically, and can reduce the time.”

“I think it’s very hard to get this kind of a chance later to have so much time to exercise. For me at least it was a good time, these three years, for me to learn several forms of exercise that will help me later in my life. So I spent a lot of time learning how to do yoga and I spent a lot of time learning how to do ballet—time that I wouldn’t have later. I knew I wouldn’t have, after retreat, that much time. So I think it’s a good chance to master an exercise form if you want.

“Doing exercise steadily in less time is much better than occasionally more time and, people tell you that over and over again, but if you can find something you can do every day—and we took Sundays off—I think it’s very beneficial. So even half hour a day is better than an hour every two days or three days, like that.”



“I think there is a great potential for exercise to go wrong, and I would repeat some things. If you do yoga especially, and even ballet without a proper motivation and if your heart is not in the right place as you are doing it then it will tighten up the *granthis*—the knots that surround your channels—and then when the prana starts flowing more, you’ll have an injury. Like you will hurt your knee or your ankle, or your back will hurt, or your neck will hurt or something like that, and that’s because your *tonglen* isn’t keeping up with your prana production. So if that happens to you then don’t give up the exercise but expand the compassion practices that will open your channels, and then the added prana will be flowing better.

“Yoga, especially for a new person, triggers a tremendous amount of new kinds of prana that the body is not used to, and then they get intense stabbing pains in their shoulders or in the neck or something like that. You’ll have to keep up your *tonglen* strongly and keep up your motivation of why you are doing yoga. Otherwise you will hurt yourself.

“I think you can get tremendous attachment to your body if you do exercise it regularly, and especially people like me who have never had any attachment to my body because there wasn’t anything to be attached to. Later if you do a lot of exercise you start noticing that you’re getting stronger and you’ll start liking that you are thinner, and then you have to be really careful of those other things. They are very destructive and they can tighten the *chakras* and then they cause injuries because you are proud. So pride before a fall is bitterly true with yoga and other kinds of exercise. If you start getting prideful about your body you’ll definitely have some kind of major injury to your body. All the great yoga teachers I know are pretty humble. The ones who weren’t I think gave it up because it hurt.

“So I think attachment to your body can be a very, very dangerous thing and pride can be very dangerous as far as exercising. You have to keep watching out for that. Also competitiveness—like you’ll see with many people who do yoga or exercises. We always did alone; we never did it with other people, but there can develop this competitiveness thing where you are wondering if the person in the next yurt can hold this asana for as long as you can, or you hear that someone else’s yoga teacher is teaching them a move that your yoga teacher doesn’t think you’re ready for yet and then you start to get competitive. And it’s natural. In yoga schools it’s a very common

problem that yoga teachers have to be constantly telling people—don't look at the other person. Good yoga teachers are very sensitive to people glancing at other people in the class because it's all coming from competitiveness and pride and thoughts like, 'Oh she's up there and I am not.' So you have to watch that even when you're by yourself.

"But don't get into this guilt thing, you have to keep your motive nice, otherwise you get into this whole self guilt thing; you beat yourself up because you didn't do it today. And that means your motivation is just wrong. There's something wrong with your motivation. If you feel that guilt thing, you're not doing the exercise for the right reason. If you are doing it for somebody else, you won't try to avoid it as much as you do if you're doing it for yourself. The more you think to do it for someone else, the less likely you will avoid it."



"I think one important thing about exercise—and a lot of people here have found it—is that it's good to do something out in the open sky if you can. There is a power to the open sky and to be out in nature. Personally we don't do yoga outside because we find it distracting. It's too hot, there's flies and insects etc. and it's not the right time of day, but walking especially and other kinds of things where you get out under the open sky is supposed to be medicinal in the Tibetan medical text.

"Just to be looking at the open sky, to be under the open sky and to be out in nature is supposed to be very powerful. We found that when we were on a break and we had a chance, we did take walks and it was really nice. Also it helps prevent the phenomenon of long-term fatigue which I keep mentioning. People who do long retreats should be aware that there is a drain on your energy just by being in retreat. So the second year—and we found especially after this two and half years that there were days when we just couldn't even do anything, just totally exhausted—you get exhausted very easily, especially if you've been doing pranayana practices wrong."



"Do things which benefit your back, for meditation. Find exercises that will help you sit straight and sit longer. We found that for example the *ashtanga* system of Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, with its vinyasas between each move where you have to go up your hands and suspend your body. And that strengthens your upper back and your back. I think he did for that because it really makes your meditation posture very strong. Between every asana you are doing this intermediate asana and it makes your back very strong and that helps your meditation.

"Do things that open and stretch the body. For example, ballet is done in an open position where you turn your hips out—you turn your upper thighs out—and then that actually is very helpful for *padmasana*, sitting in full lotus and things like, and they help each other. And I think really they both have the same effect on the body, which is to help the lower *chakras* open, because the hip—the whole hip area—is opening and getting loosened. So I think if you can find exercises—ballet is really great for that, and that the whole ballet is done very open-hipped and the feet are open. I think if you can

find things that support that kind of openness it helps the *nadis* and *chakras* in the crucial area of the navel and below.

“Don’t do—yoga especially—without expert help. I think to learn yoga from a book is very dangerous. Even it’s only at the beginning or before your retreat, try to get personal instructions. There are hundreds and thousands of yoga teachers now and there are very few really well trained ones. Try to find someone who has been well trained. Before the retreat we chose teachers who had been closely trained by very competent Indian masters and so we never saw a bad yoga teacher then, but I’ve seen some before that who must have learned yoga from a book or something. And so if you’re going to get into a new program that’s supposed to help your channels, then try to connect with an authentic Indian lineage, someone who is very familiar and has had a lot of training directly from an Indian teacher, or second generation or something like that.

“And there is an order to the *asanas*, if you are doing them with a professional. They understand how the *chakras* work and that certain *chakras* had to be open before other *chakras*. The person who teaches you should be aware of *chakras*. Sri K. Pattabhi Jois’s whole sequence is aimed at opening channels in a very logical order. And so I say try to stick to something like that. And it’s good to have an expert help during the break because you’ll get good at it, because you have more time to do it. And then if you have expert help during breaks, you can go much faster—knowledge can explode—and that way you don’t do something wrong for three years. It’s good I think—every six months, we had somebody come here to help—to correct us and then move us up to the next level.”



“Working with your channels through yoga is very inefficient, slow, sloppy. It takes an hour and half to get what you can do in fifteen minutes otherwise. But it’s observable progress, and I think it’s really good for people. I think it’s very useful, because it’s something that anybody can do, you don’t have to be a meditator. Anybody can put their body through that every day and then get slow and steady progress on the channels.”



“There is a need to be very regular at the same hour every day, because then your body by habit begins to exercise even if you don’t feel like it and you don’t want to do it. And also I found that when you’re meditating a lot you tend to get constipated. And I think that’s actually a sign that your meditation is getting deeper, is that you’re poop starts to come out in little tiny balls. What happens if you’re doing yoga especially and if you do it the right way, then it becomes very regular and eventually your body, if you do yoga everyday, will eliminate all the feces just before your daily yoga practice. It will be just be trained to do that. And then the yoga practice just goes very well.

I became very aware in retreat of how toxic waste matter is in your body—as you get more sensitive you begin to notice more and more—and even I would sometimes in the evening feel a tremendous urge to go to bathroom. I would go out and poop out one tiny little thing, like smaller than a marble, but it was giving me some kind of toxin and my body picked it up and wanted to get it out. And so I think one advantage of regular

exercise is that your body will train itself to eliminate just before that. Swami Brahmananda said that—he was a medical doctor and he was very big on eliminating once a day at the right time, and just before you do yoga is good.”



“Concentrate on exercise for developing your light body—your rainbow body—and not on developing your physical body. Aristotle made a big deal about the more you focus on your physical body, the more likely, in his system, your soul will be trapped when you die. So whenever you look at your body or you are aware of your body as you do your exercise, then concentrate on the goal of becoming a rainbow body and not of becoming a muscular mortal body that’s going to die. Don’t identify with the muscular mortal body. Identify with the light body—otherwise you’re actually setting yourself back every time you do exercise.

“Listen to your body. Listen to what needs to be stretched and what wants to be stretched and what wants to be worked and then once you get into a certain groove it will be very pleasurable. I mean it’s like getting your back scratched or something.”



“I have an idea which is that every day in my book I would propose myself a *chu lam*, meaning for example I would do half toes whenever I went to bathroom. Like from the yurt to the toilet place, I would walk on half toe and... you know, just something like that. Or you can say, ‘I am going to be Margot Fontaine whenever I pick up the tea towel.’ I mean I have my back and my chin like Margot Fontaine. I really enjoy that kind of stuff. Pick a *chu lam* that you can do between sessions, so that you keep the thread of your awareness of your practice. So with yoga it could be the position of your pelvis. You say, ‘Today my pelvis is going to be forward so I’ll do much better tomorrow.’ I would set one every day and then track it. At the end of the day I would check my book and see how I have done. So it was one of my book items during the day.

“Two things on *chu lam* that I found during the day is keep a straight back, totally straight back. Sakya Pandita said that a straight is just totally essential. So all through the day I try to keep a straight back and I try to smile whenever I remember to smile because that has a totally important effort on loosening the *ajna* chakra between the eyebrows. When you are feeling *lung* smiling is very powerful.”



“Be composed, aware and graceful during your exercise. At first you won’t be, especially if you’re new to yoga, but I think that the composed and graceful part should be as important as the physical movement part, that your mind should be composed and graceful, in a kind of samadhi as you do your asanas. And I think that’s as important as the physical exercise.

“If your mind is composed, and especially if the muscles of your face are composed and not tight, then you will get a lot more benefit—your *chakras* and your channels will get a lot more benefit.

“The condition of your face is a barometer of the composed condition of your mind. If your forehead is tightening up or the corners of your mouth are tightening up, then your *chakras* are tight, because the end of the main nexus is between your eyebrows. It runs down to the corners of your mouth. So if your face is tense that means you are not composed and it means that the inner wind is not moving in the channels as well as it could and then you’re not getting as much benefit from them.

“And you’ve seen people who are just like totally aware and relax and composed. I mean, we had a chance to watch some of Sri K. Pattabhi Jois’s most advanced students; we had a chance to watch them for two or three hours and just to watch their faces was a trip and they are so graceful. It’s almost like they are dancing and their faces were very happy. One of the yoga teachers was very big on a slight smile as you do your yoga. I found that to be very helpful.”



“I had something to say about motivation: when you get into an asana and it’s hard, then one of teachers is very big on yelling at me, “Do it for every living being, do it for your mother and do it for dead brother,” and then I would just be able to do a little bit more; I would get up to that point. And it’s hard to do that to yourself but you can do it on an occasion—like it doesn’t work every time but it works pretty well.”



“I just suddenly remembered the dream I had last night. Christie and I were sitting there and I think Trisangma was doing yoga and she was up in this position. We were all trying to do this position that was on your elbows—it was inverted... feet up in the air and down on your elbows, but it was like where you took your head back and you are resting on your Adam’s apple, like it’s impossible. Anyway, don’t try it. Trisangma was doing the best and she was saying ‘Panchen, Panchen, Panchen’ which means big benefit, big benefit. She was teasing us about being mindful of that when it gets difficult you can push a little more if you’re thinking about ‘pan’ the great benefit ‘panchen’. It was a very powerful dream. She was like ‘panchen, panchen panchen’.”



“About half-way, or after a year, we found that when we got sweaty and we were on the sticky mats that as the sticky mats got older, little pieces start to break off and stick to our skin—little tiny dots. And then I figured that’s carcinogenic, some kind of petroleum derivative—it’s wet, and your pores are wide open and this stuff is getting into them. So one of our teachers recommended a cotton mat—we found a nice one made in Mysore, which happens to be near Sera. And we roll them out over the sticky mat, so we don’t get direct contact with the carcinogenic material. And we also found it was very much more comfortable.

“Polyester clothing and so on has some kind of thing about the ions. I personally have always found them uncomfortable and undesirable and they don’t absorb oil. Oil smears on them; it doesn’t absorb into the fibers.”



“I used to work in Thailand. I used to go to Thailand to work like a month out of the year or something. At that time I had been living with Tibetan lamas for a long time and I drank like twenty cups of caffeine tea a day. Then when I went to Thailand to work I found myself getting these bizarre headaches, like these intense headaches for like the whole day, intense migraine headache in the front of my head. And then suddenly I realized I was addicted to the caffeine so strongly that I got this withdrawal. And after that I used to take tea with me to Thailand that I would I drink and I’ll be fine, caffeine tea.

So I started to find the same thing with yoga. Some of the yoga books say there are glandular secretions from one of the endocrine glands, and that’s why people feel charged up after a good yoga session, especially after doing inverted poses. And then what I found was that on Sundays when we took our breaks sometimes I would get these old Thailand headaches again, like I was addicted to something and I wasn’t getting it. And then I realized that it could very well be the endocrine secretions that I was getting from a good yoga session. So I just wanted to warn people if you’re doing yoga for the first time and you’re doing it regularly and then you take days off and suddenly you get these migraines, that it might be that. There are different things you can do about it but one of my teachers said if you do some inverted poses it helps and I think that might work. I think that’s very important to know, you don’t know why you’re suddenly getting migraines on your day off.”



“People were talking about not wanting to sit on their cushion and like the fifteen minutes before avoiding it and not wanting to get the yoga mat out and like, you know, yeah, that’s me. And one thing about having a very set schedule that really really helps is that if you say, “Okay, nine o’clock, I am going to do this.” And you do it everyday. It’s so much easier to do it. It’s so much less likely that you’re going to skip a day if you have a schedule until you’ve gotten past the point of skipping things because of laziness. Like if you can honestly say to yourself that you are no longer lazy and you’ll no longer skip a session or a yoga session or anything like that, I would say, keep a very strict schedule, you know, and this applies especially to me for exercise because, you know, I don’t like doing exercise.

“I mean once I get into it, it’s fine but in the beginning, like starting it, it’s the hardest thing for me because all I want to... you know, I love to sit down and... on my meditation cushion I am so comfortable—just still. And then to do all sorts of movements and exert myself like that, it just seems unappealing and so nobody likes it, but it’s so important to do.”

“And I found actually that having two different kinds of exercise a day was necessary for my body. One, we did yoga, which was very strenuous, and we did it for like an

hour and half to two and half hours a day. I mean we did a huge amount of time, depending on the point in our retreat. We switched off the time but it was always there. And then the second one was at a different time. I just needed to move around a little bit because the first one was in the morning and then in the afternoon I think I started to get a bit of tightness in my chest or whatever, and I just needed to go outside and stretch a little bit.

“And so we did ballet for like half an hour, which is like nothing, you know, but it was so beneficial, just to move. And this could be walk for somebody; it could be walking around your yurt for fifteen minutes. I mean, it doesn’t have to be anything strenuous, but it was something that I found that I needed because I was in the yurt constantly the whole time and going in, in, in and you need to get out, out, out.

“And one thing that really, really helps me with the ballet was what the Lama said about the sky. It was so beautiful, and we would just go out. It would be around sunset and the sky would just be absolutely beautiful—like every single day in Arizona the sky is beautiful. And we would be just be out in this gorgeous sky and we’d remember what amazing karma was to be here. I was just like bending over the bar, looking at the birds and the sky and it was just so nice. It’s so nice to give yourself that breath of fresh air and that space. It’s beautiful, and you feel beautiful, and it stopped me from gong crazy.

“And I think ballet is interesting as opposed to yoga—those are the only two I did so I don’t have any other examples—in that it’s an exercise that goes outwards, instead of focusing inwards. Yoga is very internal and the better you get at yoga they less you’re thinking about even your outside body, the more you’re thinking about your channels. You are aware of what your outer body is doing, but you are also aware of what the inside of your body is doing and you get deeper and deeper and deeper. But in ballet it’s like you are aware of sending the energy out from the center of your body out and where the energy is going from to the outside. I think it’s important to get that sort of external activity because everything else that we do is internal, internal, internal.

“It was really good for to imagine, like your hand goes out in third position and you’re sending this light energy out to the people in the west. Your other hand goes out... and you can really imagine yourself as this holy being, just sending all this energy and light to people. It’s really refreshing, not as intense and heavy as the yoga practice, which I love but I mean really it’s... enough is enough. We do like four meditations a day and an hour and half yoga practice, plus all the mantras you do, and everything else. It’s like in, in, in. So this is really nice.

“Also one of the things that we did was very occasionally at night—we like to do this at night, not any other time—we would do free dance. We would just put on our favorite songs and dance around the platform and, yeah, I know, everybody is giving me these look, like you we too loud about it and we were sleeping. Maybe we need to set something up for like the noise factor, I agree, but this was really amazing at times for me. It’s a really powerful practice and, I don’t know... Maybe the Lama will talk about it, later. It’s very powerful for your chakras and for channeling the energy in your body.”



“One of the things that was really helpful for me is that oftentimes it’s really hard to focus when you are in a sitting meditation or to learn how to focus in the beginning when you are in a sitting meditation, because we’ve come from a culture that’s always moving. And so yoga is kind of an interesting bridge, because you’re moving your body—you’re still doing an external activity but at the same time you’re focusing as intensely as you would in a meditation. So it kind of leads you into that deep focus if you’re not able to get there in a sitting meditation. And it can only help your sitting meditation. It’s really beneficial for that also.

“I found that it helped when I was in a funk, like when I was in a groove that I couldn’t get out of, that sometimes if I just go like, ‘Okay, we’re going to dance for twenty minutes and this is going to change.’ And that really, really worked. And I mean I don’t know how many people feel this way about dance but for me it’s like so joyful and so freeing and it just totally takes the small self away. It just totally lets the person I identify with, like beauty, in its static sense, like just aesthetic beauty, like in a non-personal sense. And that really helps to get out of any kind of affliction attack that you are having or funks that you are in or lethargy that you are having or blocks that you are having. I really used it a lot just to get out of a block that I was having, you know. There’s just something about it, it just kicked me out of some negative place that I was in and then suddenly it was like totally joyful. It’s like a little kind of joy machine.

“So, I don’t know if that will work for everybody, but that really worked for me. And a lot of it has to do with the music, and a lot of it has to do with just the movement and just the act of doing something really beautiful and just kind of contributing that beauty to the universe, as you will. And that’s just really freeing, like it’s just a very joyful thing to do.

“And yoga has also worked me in that way, like if I have been in a funk at the beginning of a yoga session and I say, ‘I am going to use this break for my mind, from this next activity that it’s clinging to desperately and it refuses to let go.’ I’ve used every other method to get the mind to drop the mental affliction and it won’t, but then a lot of times just the fact that you were so wrung out during the yoga practice, the mind is forced to drop the object because it just doesn’t have the energy to do both. But if you don’t set the motivation beforehand the yoga will magnify the affliction. So it’s really important to be determined at the beginning of the practice that the yoga is going to transform the affliction or it’s going to destroy the affliction or it’s going to break through the affliction rather than just letting the affliction kind of fuel the yoga practice, because that can happen too and that’s really dangerous.”



“I think yoga is a really great preventative practice. I think if your yoga practice is normal and regular, then you don’t tend to get sick. So I think it’s very good for that. So for me it’s worth the investment of time. Even the ancient scriptures say that you won’t be a person who is susceptible to getting sick.”



“I had a really major injury—physical yoga injury—about a year into retreat, and my experience was just to tough it out. I just went straight back to yoga the next morning. I couldn’t raise my arm, and so I just did the poses without using my right arm. I found it was very beneficial. It’s like when you fall off a horse and you get right back on the horse. What was it Sharon Gannon said about not giving validation to your illness? Just say, ‘You’re not part of me.’ Don’t identify with this illness or this injury. Just say, ‘Okay now I’m a different person than I was yesterday. Now I’m a person who can’t raise their right arm.’ And what would you do if you had to spend the rest of your life that way? Well, you’d get back on your mat—you’d find out some way to do your exercises without your arm. Then you’d strengthen the rest of your body, and then the arm would heal faster.”

Sleep

“Sleep also nourishes your body. And it puts those physical elements into proper order, keeps them running smoothly. You need a certain amount of sleep. Can't overdo it but shouldn't under do it.” *[from ACI course 8 transcript]*



“For trouble falling asleep, try exercising in the evening, then eating late, short prayers, and sleep. The key to good sleep is feeling concern and love for other people, so send good things to others in fantasy if you can’t sleep. If you wake up in the middle of the night, do a thanksgiving meditation, and don't be ashamed to get up late. You used the time well.”



“Expect bad dreams. I never had bad dreams in my life, but I had extraordinary, like, disturbing dreams here. Expect that. Depression. I’ve never been depressed in my life at all—never a single day. And then I had big depressions.”



“(If you have bad dreams), do the protection mantra before you go to sleep, and always sleep with the visualization of your head in your Lama's lap. Negative dreams just before waking are common, and do not reflect your state of mind as much as your deep-sleep dreams in the middle of the night, so don't worry too much about them.”

Physical illness:

We noticed at the end of retreat that we had not been seriously ill the whole retreat. That was something wonderful—I think it was the power of the protection that we did. We didn’t have any major illnesses. We had mishaps. We went into retreat with some illness that we had from India. But we were lucky and we got good doctor’s medicine and we got over that.

Also I think trying very hard not to leave the tsam—not to go out of a protected area was very important for us. And we were really, really careful not to go out of an area that we had protected. I think that helped also not to get illnesses, mental or physical.

Other Kinds of Support

“They say that certain parts of us, our body and mind, can live off feelings of joy as a kind of nourishment. That's where joy actually sustains your body, makes you feel physically better, so there's a there is a scriptural basis for that, that if you're happy your body will actually be functioning better.” [from ACI course 8 transcript]

Contacting Outside Lamas for Guidance:

“Lots of people have mentioned mental contact. I like to think of it as contact at the level of the causal body—what they call the causal body in yoga system—which is at the level of karma. Like if you do *tong len* often enough, it causes a change in your immediate reality. And the same thing with mental contact with your Lama. I think because that's where your reality is being created. It's quite amazing.

“I also agree that a retreat master would be very desirable on the side of someone who has done retreat before. Even if someone has done long retreat they might not necessarily be equipped to answer specific philosophical questions. If you can't have a retreat master or an immediate qualified Lama around, then set up several options in case one doesn't work out, or they're too busy or not available. Set up options like that with the caretakers. Then balance between confronting yourself, and try not to contact an outside source for as long as you can. There's a great value in the struggle. When it gets over your head you need to have that option available. When it becomes a serious problem to your health or mental safety then I think you have to have to have that option.

“There's a balance between co-dependence on a Lama and ignoring the Lama. Many people ignore or disrespect a Lama. The opposite extreme is this co-dependent thing where all your need for intimacy or relationships is shifted to one impossible figure. So there has to be a balance between the two. I think it's good to have a person who can give you what I call a 'validity check.' Like you could come up with your own solutions. Sometimes they're unusual and then I think you need a validity check. You might need to check in with a Lama the next time you have a chance to talk with him and say, 'I came up with this original solution to my problem, what do you think about that?' They might say that's great but should be adjusted this way. I think it's important to have a validity check on your newly discovered solutions.



“After the retreat we did a short interview with somebody from a magazine about different issues. They were shocked to learn that during the retreat I hadn't served as Lama. They had assumed I was meeting on a constant basis with the retreatants and guiding them. I think it's really important to make that clear. If you're a Lama and you're going in retreat with somebody, it's very important to make it clear how much you're going to be available and how much you're not going to be available.

“There are a lot of mentions in the records of Je Tsongkapa during his retreats where under certain conditions he would meet and have tea with his students and discuss their realizations, more frequently than we did. I think that could be a real problem and real distraction but on the other hand, I’ve heard a lot of things in these (post-retreat) meetings that really would have helped me two years ago. That’s an option you have to think about. It could get out of control easily. We learned a lot from each other in notes during the breaks that made people’s retreats easier. It’s so easy for that to get out of hand that you have to approach it carefully.”

Concentration

“Concentration is also a kind of sustenance. It’s good for your body, if you meditate regularly, like say an hour a day. First—most importantly by far—you can see emptiness if you get used to that, but even in a worldly sense it sustains. It could make you healthier. Just not having your mind torn in many different places is a kind of healthy thing for a human being, focusing on one object. And personally, I don’t know about you, but if I’m overwhelmed with too many things to do and my mind is on many objects, it actually physically affects me. And maybe physical stress comes from a lack of this kind of nourishment.

“I think of my boss, you know. His concentration powers are extraordinary, and he doesn’t have to eat much at all. And you see monks in the monastery who almost don’t eat at all, but they have some kind of extraordinary concentration and they are healthy. Their bodies are strong—they’re really healthy and strong. And they’re not eating practically anything. And that’s from concentration.

So those are the four kinds of food and I think it’s good to know those and take care of them. I think it’s important not to get hung up on these things as a goal in themselves. They say you have to use them wisely and like poisonous snakes. If you get too close to them and get too wrapped up in what you’re eating and all those things, then it’s very damaging. Eat well, live in a healthy way, take care of yourself, but it’s not a goal—your body’s going to die anyway—just keep it healthy while you use it to reach nirvana and Buddhahood, okay? *[from ACI course 8 transcript]*