



THE ASIAN CLASSICS INSTITUTE



DIAMOND MOUNTAIN UNIVERSITY

The Wisdom of Solitude Preparing for Long-term Retreat

Reading Five: Retreat Organization

*When you have understood all these things,
Go into a silent retreat, my son,
Give to it the best effort that you can,
And quickly reach the final goal.*

Je Tsongkapa

Preparation

“It all depends on collecting good karma and purifying bad energy before a big event. Whether or not your retreat “clicks” depends on whether you do this well in the months before the retreat. Before you start a retreat, you have to consciously undertake some huge virtue and dedicate it to the retreat, and also apologize to all the people you’ve hurt. This is because positive and negative energy grow in retreat. Things you can do include: taking refuge (this can be done in the office with the people who piss you off); reciting mantras; confessing broken vows; prostrations (connected with purification); mandala offerings; requesting, or visualizing the lama and requesting help; water bowl offerings; fire offerings; making images—100,000 each of all of these. Or you could follow the advices found in the oral lineage of Ganden, the Gelukpa oral instructions. (In the Gelukpa tradition, studying emptiness is considered to have more virtue than all of the preliminaries mentioned here.)”

Moreover as a preliminary to retreat, you could proclaim the highest of spoken words (ie, teaching classes); serve the sangha (cook for or make offerings to the sangha); make offerings to enlightened, suffering, and obstructing spirits; care for poor and homeless people, etc. In keeping with your income level, collect good karma.”

[From a commentary on teachings by Pabongka Rinpoche]

“We studied. We had the foundation. We had the structure of what we were going to do. And that was really reassuring, that the Lama had taken so much time to prepare us in the only way that you can be prepared, which was studying the holy words, the books. We all spent hours. I mean the whole world revolved around that. We were meeting twice a week. We just obsessed with studying this text for two years. That was the centre of our world. So that was a really great to have before retreat.”



“You should start getting ready for the retreat two months before it starts, so you don't waste time when you get there. It is disrespectful to wait until the last minute. Open your suitcase a month before, and start throwing things in.”



“Clean the inside, the outside, and all around your retreat cabin very nicely. Fill the place with incense and juniper smoke, and fragrant flowers. Take the five nectars used to make inner offering as well as cow manure, and spray it around. Make a nice carpet of flowers (throw them evenly around the house, in every single room). Inside the meditation cabin, in an appropriate place, put your pictures, sculptures, holy images, books, etc. Set up an altar nicely to the Three Jewels.”

[From a commentary on teachings by Pabongka Rinpoche]



“I think the first few weeks even, sets the tone for the whole retreat. Like we were studying ballet and the ballet teachers used to tell us ... you know, the first exercise you do is called plié where you just bend your knees. They say if your pliés are good the whole session will be good. And if you're not concentrating on your pliés then the whole session will be un-concentrated. So they had this big thing in ballet. The first five or ten minutes you have to really concentrate because then it turns into the whole thing. And I think it's the same when you begin a retreat. I think when you start you should be really focused immediately as much as you can because that's going to set the tone. Also, if you're loose with your {tsam}, loose with your silence, you going to loose with your letters back and forth in the first few months, you're not going to be able to get out of that habit.”

Motivation

“At the beginning of the retreat, the first thing to think about is how lucky you are to be doing retreat. How many people in the US can do a retreat? How many have met anyone who can explain to them how to do a retreat? How many people have a good body, have enough money to do retreat, or desire to do retreat, have the time to do retreat? How many people are there like that? So it's a good auspicious way to start retreat by sitting down and saying, 'I'm damn lucky to be doing retreat!'”

“It's very hard to find this opportunity. It can be destroyed at any time. To meet a holy being—which is to say your spiritual teacher—to meet them, and to get the right instructions from them, and to be able to engage in this holy pure path is extremely rare. Think about it until you get it, until you get conviction.”



“During the length of your actual meditation, and then between sessions, concentrate on following the instructions you got. Sit there and think about how lucky you are. You were one in a million when you went into retreat, and now you're one in a billion. To get the opportunity to do a retreat in this life, I am the luckiest person in the world.”

Sooner or later you have to realize you are the luckiest person in the world. The luckiest person. And you have to think, "Wow, this is happening to me."



"Think like this: 'Whether I get high or depressed from this retreat, whether I am able to do all of these practices successfully, or whether the people serving me are able to do their job—regardless of how it comes out, I refuse to get worried about it. No matter what happens, I won't let it overwhelm me. I understand that due to my previous karma, I might have some unexpected problems, but f**k that.' Think to yourself like that. Get some guts together. 'No matter what happens, I made it here, and I'm going to do it.'

"Thinking like this is important during sessions and between sessions. You have to keep up that motivation every day, because bad things will happen. Retreats attract bad energy. You'll get *lung*, or you'll get some problems. One time I was doing retreat, and they decided to paint the house. Fire trucks were spraying water at high velocity to blow the paint off. Things like that will happen. From the beginning, just say, 'I don't care what goes wrong; I'm staying.' That's all."

Retreat rhythm

"Your retreat should be like a grain of barley. You have to taper off like a barley grain. A barley grain is chubby in the middle, and tapered at the ends. So your retreat should look like that. You should kick butt in the middle, and come out nice.

"Start light, then go deep, and come back light, at the beginning, middle, and end of the retreat. Relax during the lead-in to the retreat and the tapering off at the end, and work really hard in the middle.

"During the first four to five days, just take it easy. Don't try to break any records, don't try to stay up too late. I get up at six the first morning, five the second morning, four the third morning. I don't do four sessions until about the fourth day. You can't go from working at your office on Thursday to Sunday morning you're getting up at 3:30 and have a good session. It's also bizarre to come out and go to the Grand Canyon with your nephews in the afternoon. You can't do that. All the great commentaries say go into it gradually and go out gradually."



"We did a schedule of one month in retreat, deep retreat, *lerung*, and then one month out. And then, after four of those, we did two months in, one month out. After four of those we did three months in, one month out.

I didn't know that from any past experience that I can remember. I think it was good in the following way. It has its drawbacks, meaning that you sort of crash during the break months, but I think you need that break, and then you go back afterwards with more strength and that way you build up further. I think for example if we had done six months back-to-back or even the whole thing back-to-back, we just would have degenerated, or you wouldn't have gone as high.

My theory is you get to certain height at a *lerung*, you drop during a break, and then you build back quickly to that height because you're rested, and then you go higher. That's my theory personally, and that's the way we structured the retreat."



"In Pabongka Rinpoche's text, and in many other texts, it says you should build up gradually. So I think you should have a schedule set, but you should get into it gradually. You see what I mean? You should know what you're going to do, but you shouldn't expect to be doing twelve hours of meditation on the first day."



"It takes me about, I would say, two weeks for my mind just to settle down enough to get into a deep meditation, which tells anybody who's only going to do a two-week retreat—you're going to get to the last day and you're going to find your perfect meditation and you're going to have to leave. So, do at least a month, okay? I don't even turn on for fourteen to fifteen days. I'm just trying to buy you some progress time."



"And there's a point, personally, when you're 75% done, and it doesn't matter whether it's three days or three months, at 75%, you have a depression and go into a three-day whack-out."



"I agree with what Geshe la said before about setting and reaching small goals. I think that if we had just done the three-year retreat, just one big mass, we wouldn't have had the energy and the impetus to keep pushing ourselves forward. I think we would just get burned out, even maybe in six months. Even the three-month *lerungs* were really hard for me. They were really long. That is also because during the last year I was just exhausted, to tell you the truth. I peaked after the second year and I started going downhill after that. Honestly, I could have done a two-year retreat and been really happy.

"Of course once you commit to a three-year retreat, you've got to do the rest, but to be quite honest, it was two years, and then I just got exhausted. So I'm not quite sure—if I wasn't exhausted I would probably have loved the three months' solitude, but as it was, the three months came during my exhaustion period. And after two months I would just burn out. I would take two or three days to just completely collapse.

He'd look at me like, 'What's wrong with you?' I couldn't do anything. I couldn't do yoga. I couldn't meditate. I could hardly get out of bed. It was really bad. One time I even got deathly ill for two days. I literally couldn't move, I had such a fever. I was like, 'I'm hot, I'm cold, I'm hot, I'm cold,'—so it's nice to have breaks."

Keep it light

"Stay happy. If things get too serious, lighten up by reading something light or walking."



"We met a nice, a great Sakya Lama, just before retreat. He spoke to us about the practices we were going to be doing, but his main thing was that you must take it easy. He said that over and over again. It's very interesting. We had gone to him for some technical advice, but all he wanted to talk about was, 'Look, I've been doing Vajra

Yogini retreats since I was seven years old with my father in a cave in Tibet. And I'm telling you, the most important thing you guys have to know is just how to take it easy, you know, steady, modest efforts, and don't get excited and don't crash, just keep going."

Maintaining your motivation

"While you are reciting mantras, do *tong-len*. Think of specific people you know who are suffering or in need. Pretend you could go to them in any form they need (like a father or a grandmother or a lover) and you could give them whatever they need; and just by touching them you could take away their worst pain, take it out, take it into your own heart, and destroy it, all in a second, with a bright burst of sunlight in your heart.

When you get tired between *tong-len* practices, relax by thinking how lucky we all are, that we are alive, healthy, have time to practice, have people to be practicing with, have teachers, have the attraction to Dharma."

Distractions

"There is this bodhisattvas vow about deeds of lesser benefit. And I think one principle about distraction is that you will be faced with different choices of how to spend the next hour and then you have to think of this bodhisattva thing of choosing—of avoiding deeds of lesser benefit—you always have to examine your practice and avoid what is of less benefit than something else. And I think for a dharma person once you get to a certain level, the whole ball game is about avoiding deeds of lesser benefit. Deeds of lesser benefit are usually easier and more interesting to your mind at the time."



"I think the people who help the retreatant design a retreat have to challenge them, and really have clear goals. People need, you need to be challenged. If you just go into a year and you're kind of dimly aware of something you have to do, you're just going to get bored actually. Or maybe when you get bored you get emotional problems because you're not busy, you know, you're not pushing forward.

"And they should be short-term goals. Like in my mind it was end of *lerung*, each *lerung* or doing so many mantras, or getting into a certain yoga asana that I couldn't do, or learning a certain amount of Sanskrit, memorizing certain amount of text. We had goals that we tried to push. Like we'd try to finish a chapter of Sanskrit by this date. I think it's good for people.

"It's hard when you get into more indefinable things. Like you can't define you've got to do so many hours of retreat, or you've got to reach a meditation, or you've got to reach a certain level in your meditation—you can't define those things."



"Like Geshe la mentioned, the first year, year-and-a-half, we didn't look at anything besides the *dak kye*. And we didn't do any kind of work like translations or anything. We were just doing the *dak kye* and mantras and meditation and yoga and the *dak kye* and mantras and meditation

And that's very powerful, not to have anything else going in your mind except for the one ritual text that you have. I mean you can get really deep into it and you can find a stillness inside of you that won't come if you're getting any other kind of outside moving stimulus. Because if you're doing a translation, the next page is always different than the page before, so it's always new. If you don't get that new thing, there's a stillness that is really awesome for your meditation. I mean, kick-ass awesome. But after the first year, we started noticing some strange things were happening. Like our eyes were going bad. We weren't using them because we weren't even looking at the *dak kye* because Geshe la had memorized it years ago and I kind-of caught up to that. And so we weren't reading anything. We weren't even looking outside much at anything. We were starting to lose normal functions of our body. And that's something that you have to think about—those kinds of things.

I wasn't even writing in a journal much because I liked the stillness so much, but I was losing the ability to articulate myself in any kind of form that someone else could understand. Like I found it really difficult to write things down even. I was forgetting how to spell very easy words. I just didn't need them any more, so things like that were going out the window. Maybe for a long-term retreat, like three years, that wouldn't be good to do the entire time because god knows what you'd turn out like if you did the whole three years like that. Maybe you would be a dysfunctional human by that time. Maybe you'd be an amazing human by that time—who knows? We didn't do it that way. It's just something that I think you have to think about. It was interesting to me though, the effects that happened."



"Next thing is to expect problems, and don't be surprised when they come up. People go into retreat thinking because they're leaving samsara, which they define as cars and cities, they're going to be happy the first day they go into retreat. I think people should expect all kinds of problems coming. It's very virtuous. Demons won't like it. And many problems will come up and you shouldn't be surprised or shocked or disappointed. You should just carry on."



"Telescopic effect—everything in retreat gets magnified, as you know. Your past relationships. I remember one lunch I had with somebody. I thought about it for six months. First six months in retreat I was obsessing over it. And you have to realize, going in to retreat, that this is going to happen to you. So mainly, future retreatants, you know, it'll help you if you know this is going to happen to you."



"And it just seems to be a process of cleaning out house. You stock your mind up full of crap. The first six months is just cleaning house. You get the big stuff out first, and then smaller and smaller, more and more, for the whole three years; but the first six months is the real obvious process.

If you find that you're going crazy just think of it as a cleansing process. It's good to know that there's an end. So, just know that there's an end."



"I can't emphasize enough how important it is not to meet another person. And that's a fatal error of some retreat centers. You have to see somebody else when you go out. I would take a chamber pot with me. The number 2's are a bit of a problem, but I've

figured out a way—you do it right into a garbage bag, and throw it outside. I had this little mountain of garbage bags outside of my retreat hut one time, because I didn't have a toilet and I had to go to see someone to go to the toilet, so I put a blanket up outside, and ... If you meet somebody, it'll take days to get it back to the way it was before. And it's uncomfortable, and you get a little crazy, and you get lots of doubts, and demons come in your head.



“Another thing to mention is celibacy. Any kind of non-celibacy, even minor kinds—any kind of sexual energy is very distracting and dissipates a lot of energy.

Sessions

“Keep your sessions frequent and short, under one and a half hours each. Personally, I have about one and a half hours of good time on the cushion, and past that is a waste of time. I prefer multiple sessions, and if you have to do five or six per day, that's fine. I usually rest, do a session, rest, etc. I don't try to do more than one and a half hours. I wouldn't start a whole new session more than four times per day. Maybe do a *kundu norbu luk* (visualize your lama), and start again.”

Breaks

“Between sessions drink a lot of liquids. Take good breaks between sessions.”



“*Gakyay* is the traditional break in the monasteries, when you're allowed to play games and things like that for, I forget, either three weeks or something, four weeks. And everybody in the monastery pulls out games and starts playing games.

“So during the first break month that we had, I just noticed that people were getting seriously spacey, walking around literally with their eyes up towards the sky and totally out of it or crying most of the time.

“It was really powerful.

“And so I thought, ‘Oh, we should play some games. We should have *gakyay*.’ So we got all these board games and volleyball stuff because I was very concerned. I didn't tell anybody but I was very afraid that everyone was getting... I thought it was going to be a loony-bin and I was very afraid. So I thought I'd better get those people thinking about something else.

“So we brought all these games and we tried that during the first break. What we found was that it's just *samsara* and it wasn't any fun for us. It was just like being back in the world. It wasn't any fun and it wasn't a break. The *samsaric* things that we had ran away from were just as boring and disturbing as they are in the outside world.

“So then we thought—in the *gakyay* in the monastery, they have a custom of reading quietly to each other. People would open up a book at random. They take it as a sign of the future, like they take it as very important, what ever comes up for you. And so on holidays they get a big book like *Lam Rim Chenmo* or the biography of Je Tsongkapa, and they would just open it up. Each person would open it up at random and read a page.

“And that developed into people bringing something that they had found inspirational for them. And then we would read in a circle, out loud, without talking. I think that turned out to be really wonderful for us. It just turned out to be the perfect kind of break for us to do, where we had each other’s company, we weren’t under any pressure to talk, we had lots of snacks. We over-ate a little bit and just hung out together in a spiritual way. And I think what we found out was that that just beats all the *samsaric* stuff—that’s why we came here in the first place to avoid.”



“We found during the breaks that we could exchange, by notes, essential information like how to deal with mice, or *lung* remedies that people had found out. Things like that, things that were very useful to know. We might exchange, sometimes, inspirational books and things like that that people had discovered.”



“Working outside is very therapeutic. We didn’t have much work to do but I remember we had to change the chimney screen, or pound some nails into the deck or something, it was very therapeutic for us. I have a feeling that, in very long-term retreats, it might be useful to have some kind of thing like that which you won’t go wild on.”



“Our yoga teacher mentioned something very beautiful. We showed him our schedule and asked him for suggestions. He said, ‘That’s a good schedule; you’re doing all important things but you should know when to break the schedule.’ And he said take natural, spontaneous breaks like when the animals show up.”

“We have a rule that when an animal shows up we just stop and we break. It’s to make it more magical—your schedule.”

Books that helped in retreat

“What I found powerful for me were books that I grew up with, the holy books that I grew up with. I grew up with a Bible—I grew up with the New Testament—and I hadn’t looked at it for twenty-five years or something, not much. And then during retreat at a certain point it became very important for me to look at it and reprocess my childhood, in terms of what I had learned. So I felt like after a certain amount of retreat I could read it and understood it. And so I think that for me was very useful.”



“We had commentaries on our practice. We had commentaries on the rituals. We had commentaries on the meditation and we had commentaries on practices that we were doing, and we found something very powerful happened. Something very interesting happened, I think because we had both worked on ACIP for so long and giving books to other people, that maybe fifteen or twenty important books came in for us, like Tibetan and Sanskrit and some English books—books that hadn’t been available, books that we didn’t know about, and books that were very important to what we were practicing—they just came in, they just came in right on schedule. And they were extraordinary books, really extraordinary books. And they changed the whole way of our retreat, and I do think it was the karma of having worked on getting books for others, that they just came in, things that we needed. It was very weird. They just came through very unexpected places. And very, very powerful. So that might imply that if

you're going into retreat it might be useful to teach other people proactively and also make sure that people have the availability of the teachings."



"We didn't read books for about a year or more. We didn't look at books because we felt it was like talking, because books talk to you. Later, I think in a long-term retreat, three years, you get into a fatigue factor because it accumulates, and a person doing a long retreat should realize that. So we started doing translations in the afternoon. We would block out an hour and a half, sometimes two hours to translate in the afternoons when we couldn't do anything else. That was very useful.

"We opened up some Indian *bakchaks*, Sanskrit *bakchaks* I think. I don't know—after six months or a year, just suddenly these Indian *bakchaks*. We had a craving for Indian food, we had to have Indian food every day and then the Sanskrit just came like crazy, just booming. And I hadn't really worked on Sanskrit very hard since right after college and it just came very, very powerfully. So you might want to look out for that kind of thing and maybe follow that kind of pattern if you feel some kind of seed ripening. Try to become aware of it and try to get in touch with it and then try to ride it."



"I found disturbing books very bad for this retreat, like we would read novels occasionally during the breaks. We didn't start reading books during the breaks but after a few breaks we started reading novels and then we found them to be very grounding, most of them were very grounding. But what I found a problem was a book that had any kind of violence in it, violence meaning something that was disturbing to your mind. There's one kind of violence where they're shooting each other and stuff, and that didn't feel so violent, but there were other books that were like psychological thrillers, about the murderer waiting for the woman getting out of a car and stuff like that and we just found that those were totally, totally not appropriate for us. And especially not before going to sleep, because they made your dreams weird.

"We asked some people to send us books, and some people started sending us heavy books, psychological books, heavy meaning books. Somebody sent us these sociological books, we just couldn't get into them at all—we just wanted something light, fantastic, something fun. And personally I've always found science fiction since I was a kid to be very *kya rim* you know, like the hero was always saving the universe. The hero was often chosen as a child and then they go through this special training and then they end up becoming the savior of the universe. I like them and I find them very inspiring.

I think what I am trying to say is to apply your *kya rim* to your reading. Especially if you have light reading, then immediately apply *kya rim* to it and say, 'Is this maybe a message from some enlightened beings, did this author come down from some other realm and he knew I would read this book ten years after he wrote it and is there some message here for my practice?'

"And what I mean is, even if you are reading a fictional book for pleasure or to calm your mind down, try to not to have ordinary thoughts about it. Don't treat it as something normal. Try to have a vision about why this book has come to you, and then that book becomes part of your practice and you try to see if there is a message there in that book, even a light fiction book. So what I am saying is that, to me those books

could be potentially as important as the Sanskrit and Tibetan commentaries I got if my mind was in a tantric mode.

“And I found biography is very inspiring. Like biographies of great people maybe to me are inspiring. The one I like is Je Tsongkapa’s biography, but we also read a lot of biographies of great yogi masters and *siddhas* and that was very valuable, for me it was very inspiring.

“We read a lot of technical books—like books explaining yoga. We got very deep into yoga asanas and so we read five or ten different books that explained each asana in slightly different ways. And I found them very valuable. I take very careful notes and then I try to incorporate it immediately into my practice. And I found that to be very valuable.

“My whole adult life I’ve never read other books except Tibetan scriptures, at all, except for occasional diamond magazines and computer magazines, but I’ve almost never read another book at all my whole adult life. And then during this retreat we started reading some books by western yoga teachers and then other books by other dharma teachers, western dharma teachers and sometimes books in English by Tibetan dharma teachers. It’s the first time in my life I’ve really done that, and I had a lot of trouble with a lot of the books.

“And then I finally realized what it was. In what’s considered Je Tsongkapa’s greatest work, his *Trang Nge Lekshe Nyingpo*, he tries to determine how do you know when Lord Buddha was speaking literally and how do you know when you have interpret what was said. Like some books, you can just take on face value and follow it. And then other books you need to re-interpret what they said.

“The whole book by Je Tsongkapa is the discussion of what’s the criteria by which you decide something should be re-interpreted or taken on face value. And he goes through many, many ideas of what should be re-interpreted. For example if it’s obviously not meant to be literal than it should be interpreted, like ‘Kill your father, kill your mother’, can’t be literal. What it means is don’t be attached to your home life, when your time comes to practice, leave your home. And then Je Tsongkapa by the end demonstrates that any book by Lord Buddha in which he didn’t teach emptiness directly is to be re-interpreted, and any book in which he did teach emptiness directly, then you can just take that on face value. And that’s the criteria for re-interpreting.

“And what he means in the end, in my mind is that every book you read, you have to re-interpret in terms of emptiness and karma. Every idea you read, especially by westerners who may not have a full lineage training, is that, in my mind, and I am being adamant about it. It’s a little hard to say it, but in my mind you’d have to re-interpret almost every book you read, in terms of karma and emptiness, to get any meaning out of it, any lasting meaning for your life and your death. You know, in Tibetan tradition, if a book doesn’t talk about what to do after you die it’s not considered worth reading. It’s not considered first level Buddhist practice.

“And so a lot of the books were quite difficult for me. And especially when it got to emptiness, a lot of them were just very, very flatly wrong. And I had a lot of trouble

with that, and so I didn't know what to do. Sometimes I'd just get angry, and then sometimes I even threw up. But I think on a practical level—what to do about it—I am talking on a very practical level, one thing, as I said before, is that you can re-interpret it in terms of *kye rim*. You know, you can say, 'This author is a divine being who is giving a message that's relevant for my life', and then you have to try to see why this book has come to you. There's always a reason karmically why a book has come to you, no matter what the book is, even if it's just a magazine. There is reason why this article has come to you. If you are on a *kye rim* practice level you can find a divine intention in that article for you and you should try, you must try.

"Then on a sutra level—the main enemy being seeing things as self-existent—I think you have to apply your knowledge of karma and emptiness to any kind of book you read. Like you might read a book about meditation and it might have twenty ideas about doing meditation, but then when you put the book down you have to filter it through your understanding of karma and emptiness. You have to say, 'Okay those are good methods of meditating, but I know that I have to keep my morality better, in order for them to work. The source of their functionality, the reason why they might work for me is only if I keep my vows'. You see what I mean?

"And I think that's one step that is missing from many of the books I read, that there are suggestions that techniques would work, and then they don't go the further step of saying, that these techniques are empty and they will only work for you if you have the karma for them to work for you, you see. So I think for me it's extremely important to re-interpret anything you read in terms of going one step further and saying, 'This suggestion about anything from asanas up to emotions, up to meditation, up to anything, I have to apply my world-view to it. I have to apply world-view to this to understand how it could work for me.' Because if you took the books on face value they would not be correct. They have to be understood in light of karma and emptiness or they don't address the final method for all living beings. They don't stack up to being taken literally.

"And that's one thing you know, there's a bodhisattvas vow about not reading too much outside literature until you're strong in your own understanding. There is another vow about not being divisive and being open to other Buddhist schools or other schools. And I think you have to very carefully draw a line between those two. I think you have to be really, really careful between those two. And I think—as Pabongka Rinpoche said—if you can filter it all through pure world-view that things are empty and they work because of your goodness. Then I think, he says, you won't fall into any great abyss. His parting advice is whatever you read, as long as you can keep that sublime world-view of karma and emptiness then it will be beneficial for you. And otherwise it will degrade your understanding. If the author doesn't have an understanding of karma and emptiness and if you expose your mind to that carelessly, then it will degrade your understanding of the way to get enlightened.

"So I feel very strongly—I'm getting nervous, my hands are shaking—but I just ... I don't know how to say it but it's a very ... it can be a very dangerous thing if you don't ... your understanding ...

“Even I’ve seen two separate versions of how to view your lama for example, recently. One was all these rules about, if you get this feeling or if you get this feeling, or this is going on or that’s going on and blah blah blah, and this is psychologically nice and this is psychologically damaging blah blah. That’s one way to perceive a lama. Then I was reading one by Lama Zopa, a few pages by Lama Zopa and it was all such pure world-view. He was like, you have to change your karma. What you see is because of your karma—your lama is empty. And it was such pure world-view sliding out of these three or four pages and I was like ... it was like a vacation, it was like ... it was like you can read a thousand pages of different modern things and then to read three or four pages of that and this world-view burning in it, and so pure and I just ...

“I don’t how to say it right, but I guess it’s *trang nge*. You know, if it treats emptiness and karma properly, it’s to be taken on face value, and if it doesn’t, then you have to re-understand it in terms of karma and emptiness. And it was just so beautiful. And then on a tantric level you have to see these words as being sent to you by divine being and ask yourself what’s in here for me to learn. And that’s my take on books.”



“Now I wanted to clarify some things because I feel really, really strongly about this. And I want it on the record—just this one thing. Like how do we relate to books that are not specifically talking about the correct view of emptiness and karma? How do you relate to books that are less than that? Now they could be purposely less than that, like the lower three-and-a-half schools of Buddhism. I mean Lord Buddha knew what the right view was, but he didn’t express it in the lower three. Or it could be that the person doesn’t know the right view and can’t express it. But either way it doesn’t really matter does it? I mean, a book is to be reinterpreted in view of the correct view. So we don’t ever know really sometimes if the author really understands correct view or not on that book, you see? Like, if you just read the *Abhidharma Kosha*, you could conclude that Lord Buddha doesn’t understand correct view. Or the *Abhidharma* scriptures. But what should your relationship be to those books? And what I wanted to say and have on the record is that it’s a Bodhisattva vow. If you have Mahayana scripture available and you haven’t got any other compelling reason, you shouldn’t read the Hinayana scripture. That’s just a Bodhisattva vow. If there’s no other compelling reason then you should go for the higher one.

“And then there’s an interesting thing, that Mahayana and Hinayana distinction in Je Tsongkapa’s text about interpretation is not bodhicitta and non-bodhicitta, because for example in the *Abhidharma Kosha* you find explanations about bodhisattvas. And Geshe Thubten Rinchen threw that out to us. What it boils down to is that on a certain level Mahayana can mean the higher two schools of the ancient schools of India, meaning those who have some good understanding of emptiness, and the Hinayana can mean the two schools that don’t have that kind of understanding of emptiness.

And so I would take it that way. If you have a chance to read a book about saving all living beings or that is written in the context of saving all living beings, you should read that one before a book that doesn’t explain that. If you have a choice and if you haven’t studied both of them, and all those other conditions. And then they say once you’ve gotten strong in your view and you’re not going to be swayed by another view, then go ahead and read the Hinayana, and you’ll get a lot out of it and there’ll be a lot of useful

things. It's useful to know all the wrong ideas about emptiness that come up once your view is strong.

"So I think that's important. And now as it came to my mind really strongly: it was like a man is having a heart attack and his kid comes out to help daddy. And he pulls out a Band-Aid and says, 'Don't worry daddy, I'll take care of you, I have a Band-Aid.' And that's the difference between a presentation that follows an arya's presentation of emptiness and the presentation that doesn't follow that. I mean, it's like the difference between the proper treatment of a heart attack and a Band-Aid. The child is a person who hasn't seen emptiness directly can run up with a Band-Aid.

"And what I wanted to say is, how do you relate to this child? This child has come with a Band-Aid. How do you relate to books that either intentionally or unintentionally don't present correct view, that are written with a self-existent view. And I wanted to say they're so rare in the world—it's so beautiful and rare in the world that anyone would be concerned about another person. Any book which expresses concern or how to help other people with any kind of problem to me—and I think this is a very important point—has to be respected and honored and it's one in a million. It counts as one in a million in the universe. One person out of a million has this idea to write something that benefits other people. And those are the books that we're attracted to, I think most of us are attracted to. And they are like a child coming with a Band-Aid for a heart attack.

"And you encourage the child. You wouldn't kick the child or yell at the child or tell the child to go away or something like that. You wouldn't ignore the child; you would take it as a very precious thing. And I think that's that bodhisattva vow about other schools, the lower schools, that you don't disparage them, you just treat them as very, very precious, on the scale of the universe it's very precious for a child to come with a Band-Aid.

"But in my own mind when the child comes with a razor blade and says, daddy, I'll do a heart operation on you—which in my mind compares with presenting emptiness wrongly or in an uninformed way—that that's really dangerous. When the subject comes to emptiness and the child comes with a butter knife or a razor blade and says 'I saw a heart operation on TV daddy, don't worry, I can do it.' To me that's exactly the same thing. I get the same reaction from a mistaken explanation.

"If they don't talk about emptiness at all and it's just a kind-hearted thing, that counts in my mind as the Band-Aid. If they do talk about emptiness but they talk about it in a very wrong way, to me it's like a butter knife or a razor blade in the child's hand. And it has that same danger to it of if you expose your mind to it I think there's a danger to it. If you expose your mind to that, there's a big danger. If you're very strong in your worldview and you're very well trained, then you can go and read those books and be critical and say, 'Well, this part is right, this part is not so right'.

"But if your worldview is not strong, because it's so fragile in your mind—seeing other beings as holy beings, all of them, even the ones who give you trouble—it's so fragile that if you put your mind in the presence of a lesser view you would be endangering yourself. Our understanding of emptiness can be so fragile and so delicate. It's like

being next to a bulldog and then someone comes in with this worldview—like gossiping about someone else, for example—and then you're like, 'Wait, I was just thinking of them, I was trying to understand that they were my own projection', and they're saying, 'No, no, we've got to talk to them this way and that way and we've got to do this to them and we've got to do this to them'.

"And they get you off the subject into do you do A) self-existent or do you B) self-existent. And really what you have to do is purify your own seeds so you never see this person as they appear to be, giving you trouble. Like the solution for terrorism in the world is *ahimsa*, personal *ahimsa* and then it doesn't exist anymore. So what I mean to say is that worldview is so subtle that if you expose your mind to lesser worldviews or a book written on a different subject but still with a lesser worldview, then you endanger your worldview. And to me that's like endangering your heart.

"So that's my spiel about that. I feel so strongly about it. All of the books available I think on Buddhism are very precious. You have to see them as one in a million. They're extremely precious, extremely rare and when you touch one with your hands you have to say, my god, billions of years I've been waiting and now I have a book that even has the word Buddha in it. To me you have to have that feeling about other books, and then you have to see that they are leading people up to the place where they can get on to the Mahayana higher view of emptiness and get to Buddhahood.

"So in the monastery there's this huge debate: all Buddhist teachings amount to one path. They're all one yana, there's only one yana. Hinayana, Mahayana, Vajrayana are all one yana. And so I think you have to cherish them and value them and honor them, and then I think every time you read one book that's not written with worldview you have to go read a book with worldview and then go back. Depending on what your level is. It all depends on your own capacity.

"Some people don't have any capacity for worldview. They just don't get it. They just don't have it and then they need lower books, they need books that don't talk about worldview to get them up to worldview. So a Buddha would use all of those methods and skillful means. A Buddha would come in the world and be writing about bowling and car repair and stocks and bonds, and then they would use self-existent viewpoints to get people up to the real viewpoint. But once you're close to worldview you have to be really careful and not endanger that very fragile worldview by lesser books or even being around lesser people who don't grasp it very much. That's my spiel. I feel strongly about it."

When to study and when not to

You have to distinguish between when to study and when not to study. I've always considered study to be a very good discipline. Like if you do it in a very disciplined, careful way, I think it can be very important for your meditation and your practices. Also I think you have to be very disciplined about how long you do it each day because it can become a distraction, and over a certain amount of time it becomes an indulgence and you're not really doing a tantric practice. You're doing it because you are familiar with it, and it's less difficult than meditation and yoga. So watch out for it. Just indulging in studying when it's not germane to what you are doing.

Diary

“Keep a diary, stop any time and write in it your ideas for improving your heart, whenever they come to you.”

Discipline

“I’m on discipline, backing off versus pushing yourself. And I also want to put in a word for pushing yourself too far, in two senses. One I noticed in business. I was in a corporation for fifteen years and what I learned in business was that people have about three times more capacity than they ever thought and just people like a school teacher came in and became one of the biggest color stone buyers in America. The largest diamond buyer maybe in the United States was a cowherd in Gujarat state. And people like that. Just to see how people can really develop if you give them a chance and if you push them. And so I think everybody has about three hundred per cent more capacity than they believe.

“I was reading Master Iyengar’s life story and there’s this relationship you can have with a lama and very, very few people get there. It’s the willingness to just go for it when the lama tells you to do something; it’s the willingness to just do it, even if it really hurts. And Iyengar was giving a demonstration. He was fifteen years old and his lama said, ‘Do Hanuman asana’, which is a split, for a boy who’d never done one. And he just did it and he tore both of the tendons in his legs and he couldn’t walk for like six months properly. And then, because he’d done that, he always had this fantastic stretch in his legs after that. You know what I mean? And it’s the same with Naropa-la or Milarepa-la or other people like that—they just did it. The lama said do it and they did it. And very few people have that capacity. I think it actually divides people who really get attainments from people who don’t. It’s one thing, and they just do it no matter how much it hurts and no matter what, they just do it.

“I think I learned that somewhat with Khen Rinpoche. You know, he was very, very hard on me and he made me do stuff I would never have agreed to myself. And I think if you are willing to submit yourself to being pushed then you can really go far, much further than you ever imagined. And I think the opposite is bad. It’s bad to go too far and hurt yourself and then quit. But I think the benefit is much greater than the potential loss. People do break, people do quit, but I don’t know of any really great master who hasn’t been through a substantial pain, and in most cases that’s some kind of surrender to their lama and they just say, ‘Okay, I’ll do that’. And they just do it. That’s my experience, my personal experience.

“And I also agree that you can’t judge the result from how you feel right now. Like, you won’t feel very good doing most of the practices that help you. You won’t feel very good at first. And then my experience that I always tell people is that if you do something an hour-and-a-half a day, in a year that’ll be your favorite thing. You know, people often slide into their favorite thing to do and they avoid what they don’t enjoy doing because they’re no good at it, especially as you get older—you can’t teach an old dog new tricks. For people my age it’s very hard to do something new, because it’s so uncomfortable. And you have other things that you’re really good at by the time you’re fifty so you just tend to shift your whole life towards the direction that you’re already comfortable with. And as you get older, it becomes more pronounced I think and

you're less able to throw yourself into something new or that you're not good at. So I agree that it's very important to keep that elasticity as long as you can in your mind, especially as you get older, that you're willing to throw yourself into new experiences that you're not good at. Like ballet.

“Also I found one thing about discipline is it's difficult to discipline yourself in three-year retreat because there's no precedent. Our ballet teacher was telling us that in her ballet classes, the teacher would tell them to do a certain move, and then nobody could do it so nobody tried very hard, for like a couple of weeks. And then one girl would do it and then everybody by the next day was doing it. It's that fear thing. And the problem in retreat is that you don't have that example from others, and meditation experiences are so hard to quantify. So I think that's one reason why discipline is so difficult in a long retreat is that by definition there's no one immediately to compare yourself with. And so there's none of that sort of unhealthy motivation, which is a motivation that works a lot of the time.”

Boredom

“I think boredom isn't really the right word—I think maybe under-utilized capacity. But it's just where you don't feel challenged. You don't feel up to the edge of your capacity; you don't feel that you're working at your capacity, and to me it's a very dangerous state of mind. I've noticed that people get a lot more mental afflictions when they're not being challenged. If you don't feel like you're on the razor's edge of your capacity, then you tend to get mental afflictions also. And then you get into depression or anger. And I wanted to say that it doesn't mean busyness, but it means challenging yourself—keeping yourself at the edge of your capacity, rather than busy, and I distinguish between the two. It's not that you do more asana practice or even that you do a different asana practice, but that in the asana practice that you do you drive yourself and you challenge yourself to the fullest of your capacity—otherwise people don't feel happy—or I don't.

“I read something by Swami Satyananda that was very interesting—he has this place in India where people come to learn yoga and pranayama and kriyas, and they're a very good school. He said that he just taught people in the afternoon, and then sent everyone home, and they were bickering, and people didn't advance very well, and a lot of people left. And then when he changed the pattern of the place, and he said ‘Okay, you have certain duties’, and he gave everyone a project to work on that challenged them. Then he said the place exploded.

“You need a wise variation of practices and schedules, so you don't get stale—I think it's the distinction between getting stale and reaching a certain depth in what you're doing, and I think you have to be wise about distinguishing between the two. Sometimes you're just feeling antsy, and you want to do something new because you think that will make you happier than what you are supposed to be doing or what you did yesterday, and it doesn't. But if you've been doing a series of asanas that's been emphasizing backward bending for a couple of weeks, then if it's a forward move to change to another one, that emphasizes something else that you need, then I think it's good.

“I think that you need personal goals. I always talk about my boss, Ofer, saying, ‘Did you review so and so this week?’—the yearly review or the six month review. And I’d say, ‘I was too busy’, because that’s the kind of thing managers just put off because they’re too busy.

“And he got angry and said, ‘You have to review people, because you can’t expect people to stand there,’ he said ‘like a bowling alley where you roll balls at pins, but the pins are covered with a sheet, and you can’t see what you knock down.’

And a lot of companies are like that—people are driven and driven, and no one ever takes them aside and says, ‘This is what you’ve accomplished, this is what you’ve done.’ You need to feel some kind of short-term goals, I think. Certain people get to a point where you don’t need that. Certain driven people just don’t need it—they just drive themselves, immensely deeper than anyone else—but in general, normal people need some kind of short-term personal goals, and need to have some idea that they’re progressing.

“So some examples for me were that I tried to increase my *padmasana* every day—I tried to do a minute more every three or four days. I tried to do more challenging yoga positions, or tried to do the ones I was doing in a more challenging way. I had this checklist idea where I tried to identify three or more ways in which I’m doing something less well than I could do it—like meditation, or yoga or things like that—and then I would keep a checklist, I would track those weaknesses for a few weeks, and then keep changing them.

“So like in yoga it might be that I found I wasn’t trying to get deeper into a pose, or in meditation I found that I was not being as still as I could be. I would track that for a few weeks in my book, and then I would move in to the next weakness. Also in my personal demons, I would track that in *sojong*. During *sojong* I would try to identify the mental afflictions that I really wanted to work on for the next two weeks—and you have to rotate them because normally you have the same ones, or main one for like a year. So then I’d have some feeling of addressing a challenge and then making progress on it. I think you need creativeness in your spiritual life.

“The minute the element of creativity comes into it somehow—like you can do ballet over and over again, the same moves, but the minute someone tells you choreograph your own two minute piece—then you just go crazy—then you’ll practice it all night, because it’s your piece, and I think that’s exciting. Or like someone who hasn’t been teaching, if you have your first class or if you have your first students, you’ll get up early and you’ll cram like crazy to be ready for them. Whereas if you didn’t have that opportunity, you wouldn’t be so creative.

“So I think you need to find ways to help get yourself into that creative niche. And frankly for me, it’s knowing that I might be helping somebody else, and that makes it more exciting for me. If I know I’m going to be teaching a certain scripture to somebody in the next few months, then I’ll be much more likely to attack it with more excitement.

“A lot of our yoga teachers said to be adventurous—you’ve got time in three year retreat, you don’t have anything else to do, nobody’s watching you—it’s a time you can look foolish and no-one’s going to know. And you can try to do things that you can’t normally do, and if you fall down, or if you blow it, or if you get a lung attack, no one’s going to really know. So I think it’s a good time. Our yoga teachers David Life and Sharon Gannon are really into that—they call it being slightly aggressive with your yoga practice. Like taking chances a little bit, and pushing yourself a little more than you normally do and then. When you’re with them for four or five days, at the end of it, then you can do everything twice as good as you could before, because they’re pushing you. So I think it’s a good time to be a tough guy, to be adventurous, to go for challenges.

“Having said that, I think a person in three year retreat has to appreciate the value of repetition, and not get bored with repetition. There’s an ancient alchemical saying that out of repetition rises the magic. And I think that if you go into three-year retreat, you’re going to have to face the fact that a lot of it is going to be repetitive. And that that’s the only way you can get to certain states of meditation or certain kinds of places with your inner body or things like that. They just require—Swami Shivananda calls it ‘jackass patience.’ You know—you’re just like a jackass and you just keep doing it over and over—what he calls asinine patience. You’re just willing to keep doing it over and over again, until suddenly it clicks, and you’re in seventh heaven with your meditation.

“If you’re going to be in three year retreat, you’re going to have to be a person who can put up with repetition and be disciplined. I think thanksgiving is a great way to get out of boredom or not feeling challenged. Doing a short fifteen meditation in the evening is almost a cure all for anything—sit down and think about all the great things that have happened in your life, all the holy beings who might have made contact with you, all the holy activities you’ve ever heard of—for example like the fact that so many people are suddenly doing *lerungs* in the world—you know like hundreds and hundreds—stuff like that. You can really rejoice about anything. And for me that really extends to the precious human life idea. Then as you get more and more into meditation and learn more and more about death—to me solitude teaches a lot about dying—you begin to think that your life and your body have been very precious and very valuable and that you should take advantage of it.

“Lastly I’d say—I’m into this thing where you should have a passion for whatever you do. If you don’t have a passion for whatever you’re doing, then either you shouldn’t be doing it, or you should stop doing it, sit down and think why you’re doing it. Because you’re not thinking about that if you don’t have passion. I don’t like to see people do things that they don’t have passion for. You know life is short—three-year retreat is an incredibly precious time and it’ll go like nothing else—and you should have some passion for it, and you should throw yourself into it. Or else you should do whatever else you have passion for. People should try to find what they have a passion for and then they should surrender themselves to it and then throw themselves into it.”

Exercise and sleep

“Be careful to get enough sleep, and exercise once in the late morning before lunch, and then in the late evening too before dark; go for long walks where you won’t see anyone. The best “long walk” is if you can do some circumambulation nearby your retreat cabin;

keep your eyes down; don't look at anyone who comes around. Okay to lie down for short rests anytime it comes to you, especially after lunch.”



“One more thing about that is sometimes you feel like you don’t need to sleep much. Sometimes I didn’t even sleep when we had five hours sleep. I’d just sit and think about things. Then, there were other times when I needed more sleep. And you really have to let your body sleep when it needs to. I think that’s really wise because you’re dealing with energies that you haven’t—if you’re like me—that you haven’t dealt with before in your life. Things are going to start manifesting to you that you don’t understand. You don’t understand how your body and your mind are working now, and they’re totally different than it was before. You just have to listen.”

“I was very aware that I couldn’t go for long walks. It wasn’t permitted. So I designed my furniture around the room so I walked during *lerung* inside of my yurt. And I walked for three hours a day because sitting is good but you needed to be moving. And I also requested that my fence was even all the way around where I had adequate space to go for walks. So, when it was cold I walk inside and when the weather is nice, I would just go for long imaginary walks. So you have to think about you body is going to be restricted.

“Some of us did yoga and dance. But for me it was walking; it was moving. For me it was going somewhere, a place that I couldn’t go anymore. Going for a walk was symbolic of going out of doors. So think about what kind of movements that your body would like best and try to make those arrangements.”