



THE ASIAN CLASSICS INSTITUTE



DIAMOND MOUNTAIN UNIVERSITY

The Wisdom of Solitude Preparing for Long-term Retreat

Reading Six: Communication and various mental states

“As soon as I got into lerung it was just magic in so many ways. I was so taken aback by what it’s like to be in a deep state of concentration. And all the silence—like everything I would hear: the flies outside or the wind. It was all like this beautiful music. It was like the spirits of the place were welcoming me, and they were playing this music everywhere I went. And it was so amazing.”

Solitude

“I’ve lived pretty much alone, especially for the last twelve years before retreat. Being by myself wasn’t the main problem. Watching my mind traveling all over the place was the problem. You could be alone but my problem was watching my wandering mind just like all over the universe. And it went to people that I really love and respected. And what I found about loneliness is that there’s a deep aching thing inside of your heart that everybody needs. Everybody wants to be loved, respected and accepted and that those three things were the root of what my loneliness was searching for. It was not to be with another person, it was these three things—love, respect and expectations. The isolation in itself was not a problem for me but it was what my mind did, because it was isolated. It went straight to the crux of my heart and what I was really yearning for, and what I found out it was not to be in the presence of another being, it was these three emotional factors.

“It was a big struggle to go through feeling this emptiness, feeling like you needed love and being accepted. And then my mind went to the levels of the society, everything that we do to be accepted, how we join clubs, how we wear different clothing, it’s such an important thing. And I couldn’t see it in the American culture but here was this thing that I was seeing, this concept of a label and these labels are the things that we hold on to. In retreats, my loneliness came out of expectations, wanting to be with somebody or some group. And I realized how phony it is. It is something exterior, it’s exterior. It is physical and it’s worldly.

“This is just one example of all the things that my mind was holding on to when I said loneliness, because in loneliness you associate yourself with clothes, people, societies. Why do you wear certain clothes? Because you want to belong, or you want to be in the in-crowd. Why you do join the tennis club? Because you want friends in a tennis club.

So it was just amazing to see what loneliness meant to me, and it was not a physical being, it was just all these associations that I had for years, in my mind. You are yearning to be filled with a spirit but you don't know what it is, and you are just reaching out for all of these hopes. It was amazing to see that my loneliness was not based on having people around me, but going into my head and seeing everything that I had associated with that I was looking to be filled and didn't fill me.

"The one thing that I found that helped me with the void of looking at all these different things, emotions in my mind, was that I started to do *tong len* for lonely people, and that really helped me. So that's one thing you could do if you feel lonely in retreat. Get your *tong len* meditation out. For me I love old people, so I thought about all the lonely old people who don't have children and stuff like that, and I just sat and I did *tong len* meditation for them. So, you know, that helps your mind. So that's what I would recommend."



"I think if you are going to see people during the retreat, especially during *lerung*, you need to schedule it ahead of time, unless you have a blow-out. And then I thought the retreat master in the future—I hope there'll be a retreat master—they could help you define when you need to meet a friend and when you don't need to meet a friend. The idea with our retreat was that you were going to learn those things on your own."



"In Je Tsong Khapa's biography, sometimes he did this kind of retreat. He and one or two other people would go off on retreat and then they would see each other once or twice a day or see each other for meals and they would eat together and they would actually compare notes every day, every few days. So I think that's also kind of retreat you can do. There was a precedent in the scripture for that kind of thing. They would actually sit down and say, 'Did you see Manjushri yet?' That might be fun to try, as a sort of a different kind of retreat."

Silence

"I'm a big fan of silence. I think silence allows you to listen. I think when you're talking you don't listen. It's as simple as that. It goes to the deepest level. You start listening; you become aware of subtler things, subtler realities. They start expressing themselves to you because you're available, because you're listening.

"Everybody wants mental silence. Mental silence is very important to deep meditation, deep meditative concentration. In order to get mental silence you need verbal and written silence. You need to do that for a long period of time before the mental silence comes.

"The preliminary aspect of mental silence probably starts to come after a few weeks of doing verbal and mental silence. For a long time you're just blah, blah, blah, blah, blah in your head. It's very easy to go back to verbalising things with sounds when your mind is having discursive thoughts. It's really no different; until you reach a state of mental silence, I would say you're not even in silence. But it's a beautiful, amazing state

of being—just experiencing something very deeply because there’s something about discursive thought that blocks you from experiencing something for real. And you just have to experience it. It’s not something that can be explained. And it’s the key to samadhi. That’s the road that leads you to samadhi.

“All that extra discursive blah, blah, blah stuff is just weighing you down. You just need to release yourself from it. Let go of it. It takes a while. You are going to have blah, blah, blah for awhile. You just need to ride them out without buying into them, without feeding them.”



“I think it’s after two years that I started listening to the silence as a sound. I still do it sometimes but it might be interesting to be aware that you can listen to silence, consciously, as if you were listening to a song or something. It just became a very nice part of some meditation.”



“Chanting is something you could experiment with not doing or doing if you find a lot of chatter in your mind. We used to find that right after our meal, we couldn’t do much constructive so we used to chant for maybe half an hour. Then you’ll find that chant running through your mind instead of chatter. And if it’s Sanskrit, like a Sutra, then you’re actually getting Lord Buddha’s chanting in your mind. The texts I know that are by enlightened beings especially, are very powerful for me to hear them. It’s like having them all the time talking to you.

“I think you have to figure out what to do during rituals. Some people chant it. Some people whisper it. I know one retreator just tried to do it in her mind. You should experiment.”



“One big thing about silence is consideration of others. We had incidents between us—I was on the receiving end and on the giving end, and you feel this urge to do something that’s going to make some noise. It takes great discipline I think for a retreatant to be considerate of other people’s silence. It’s the thing they came here for. It’s the thing they’re working for. And then you really want to make this thing with this hammer but you know somebody’s going to hear it. And then you have to struggle with yourself.

Find ways to be considerate of other people’s silence. It’s a very important part of the karma of having your own silence.”

“Noise of objects in the yurt: the more objects there are in your yurt, the more noise there is. I don’t know why it is, but our yurt has gotten noisy now because every object makes its own kind of noise. I can’t sit in a room without reading all the book titles even if I’ve read them all a hundred times. It gets very noisy.

“I think music for me is particularly disturbing. And I think if you’re musically inclined it’s pretty important not to have any access to music if you really want to keep silence.

Originally, at the very beginning of retreat, we said we wouldn't even write notes for toothpaste. We would check a line on a list and keep sending the list back and forth. And I think that was a really good idea. We didn't even write 'Send us toothpaste.' We didn't write any notes."



"There was a problem with increasing sign language, and muttering language—we developed a very sophisticated throat language where you're not saying a word but it's communication. It's extremely difficult not to get into that. The desire will come to talk and the mind tries to convince itself that this thing is important enough to talk about. You've just got to fight it.

"Also when you get into heavy emotions, you want to start talking. I think the real intent of silence was to just not want to say anything rather than trying to say it in a silent way. You know the distinction? I think for me that was a problem. The reason we developed a throat language was because I wanted to talk. You see what I mean? I think you have to get to a point where you don't want to talk. If you want to talk it doesn't matter how many rules you have, you're going to do something.

"I find that reading or writing becomes talking when you're in deep retreat. When you read it's like having someone speak to you. And when I wrote, like the book I wrote, it was like speaking to someone. In your mind you're framing speech and it's almost the same as talking. Especially in the one-month retreats we were very strict about not reading or writing anything.

I think a journal—you have to decide how strict you want to be. There have been retreats I did where I didn't want to have a journal. Most times it's a great outlet for good ideas but sometimes it can also become a kind of talking.

Three years of not talking at all, even in a journal, for that I think you'd need extreme discipline. And, to me, you'd need some challenging goals throughout the day that didn't involve writing or reading. You'd have to have some kind of pretty strict physical program going on."



"When you're quiet for a long time your mind gets louder, the talk in your own mind. You should know in advance that it becomes almost disturbing. The noise of your own mind, it's almost incessant, and it becomes very, very loud. Some of the other retreatants were hearing things. I think it was their ears or they were hearing the blood in their ears and stuff like that. It was really disturbing for them. One of them was walking around like a zombie a little bit. So that's just something that's going to come up and you should know it."



"I think it starts to be very tempting to write to people when, especially in deep retreats, when all this stuff is coming up. We talked about it before I think. It's really important to hold back and respect your vow of silence. And it's really important to realise at that time that your silence would be a much better gift to these people that you're thinking of than your letter would be at the time."



“The thing that silence does bring to you is the sensitivity of other people’s minds. When that starts to happen your compassion practice is really important because you can go one of two ways. You can take it personally when someone else is having a hard day and gives you a mean vibe or you can understand—because you know what that’s like—and you can just let it go through you. And when you’re in a group of people somebody’s going to be having a bad day almost all the time. It’s so important not to take it personally. It’s so important to have your compassion practice and to just be really spacious about it because your sensitivity, due to your silence, your sensitivity is just going to skyrocket. If your compassion practice hasn’t quite caught up that can cause you a lot of mental suffering.

“When you see it start to happen your feelings start to get hurt because someone else is having a bad day. They’re not even aware of hurting your feelings. Your sensitivity is just way over the top and, you just need to be really loving and be really accepting of it. That’s really important. So compassion is really important.”



“Words exposed, like exposed writing in your yurt. I mean, forget it. That’s loud. Cover it. I covered all my bookshelves with cloth. That soft off-white cloth. You don’t want to have loud colours either. They just scream at you. You want to have everything as still as possible. All my altar supplies are under a cloth. All my books are under a cloth. All my clothes are under the bed. I’m not seeing any visual clutter. And it’s really important because your mind latches right on to it. I realized I was reading the label on the vitamin C every single day. How many times do you have to read the label on the vitamin C? You don’t have to read it.”

Memories—revising the past

“I think it’s really important when you’re in retreat to look at your memories with correct view according to the practice that you are doing. Like every single time you remember something—say it’s some incident that you had when you were in third grade or something like that—every ten years that memory is going to change drastically. It’s not going to be the same memory every time that you go back to, because you’re changing. And so the memory like evolves with the person. So in reality there is no self-existent memory that you can actually go back to and grasp onto as your ‘past’ you know. There only the present you at that moment, creating this memory, creating this so-called memory, which there is no reality for. And it is so easy to believe in them, and I think it’s important to know how to deal with that.

“What happens is as you get quieter is that your memories starts to get stronger and more lucid and deeper, and it takes on this entire new reality that you never could have imagined before. And so you’re going to need an equal amount of strength to sort of combat them when they come up in your meditation, instead of your meditative object, you know. You’re going to have to be able to quiet them down and look at them logically and put them in their place.”



“I found it useful when we talked in class about historical revision of your life. Like, go back and say, ‘That asshole that bugged me three-years ago was pushing me to where I am today, and they’re a deity, you know.’ Whatever you think about all the relationships you ever had, they all contributed to getting you here. So it’s very possible to entertain the idea that they were enlightened beings who helped you get here, and are helping you develop to the point where you can come here. So I found that very powerful.”



“Something else I think I did a lot in the first six months, I was really obsessive. I was going over, in excruciating detail, every single past relationship, everything I could have done, everything I didn’t do, everything I did do that I regret, everything that I did do that I wished could have been more. It was every permutation of every kind of moment of every relationship in just gory detail – much too much detail.

“What really struck me about that process, while I was trying to figure out why I was doing it, was that I was trying to learn to relate to people in a new way, in a more enlightened way. When you come into retreat you get the chance to revise your identity. You’re kind of forced to revise your identity. It’s not really a choice.

“So after a while I realised I was teaching myself, again, how to relate to my parents, how to relate to friends, and how to relate to significant others, life partners, in a more enlightened way. The benefits that came out of all the regrets I had were that I really thought about it and I really felt it, and I really made a strong determination not to repeat those incidents. I got a chance to integrate regret into my identity in a non-guilt way, which is, ‘Okay from now on I’m not going to relate to people that way. I’m going to not repeat these mistakes I’ve made because I’ve had to relive them in retreat for so long that I’m never going to have to relate to people that way again.’

“So for me that was something really healthy that came out of those first six months of just excruciating detail, reviewing the past. It was a fresh take on how to relate to people. And the space of the rest of the three-years has given me a lot of space for a new way to relate to people.”



“And your mind keeps going. It’s like it doesn’t have anything new to keep it going, so it’s just kind of rehashing everything in the past. And it takes everything. It takes all the things that developed your personality, all the childhood relationships that you had, all the teachers that you had, your parents when you were young, friends when you were young, your boyfriends as you started to get older. Everything. And you just review it until you’re just so bored. I personally, didn’t think that I could bear it one minute more.”

Dreams

“I found my sleep varies tremendously from five hours with no nap, to having to just conk out completely, having to take an afternoon nap. Sometimes I’d oversleep the

alarm and sleep two hours in the afternoon. But I just let myself do that. I just kind of followed that advice of sleeping as much as you needed to. And sometimes there was just so much happening, and I felt like I was going through a lot of purification and just needed to sleep more. And a lot of times, I felt like so much was happening in my dreams, that I just needed extra dreamtime. Like, I just needed extra REM time to process all this stuff in my dream life so I just let that happen.”



“Something I noticed was all these manifestations of really strange emotions and energies that I didn’t know I had. They just ripen you know. They just come up unexpectedly. And, for me, it was all this—it’s kind of embarrassing but I think people should know—all this sexual energy. I don’t have a habit of thinking about people sexually but every night for the first six months, I would have a sexual dream about a different person. It was really disturbing. It was like, god, what is wrong with me? Why am I obsessing about sex? It was just all this energy ripening all of a sudden. And it was completely unfamiliar, and unlike anything that I related to my own identity.

“I think it was just the power of solitude, silence, isolation, and maybe just the virtue of attempting to do a retreat made all these things ripen unexpectedly. You don’t know what’s hiding in there, so don’t be too disturbed. It’s going to be disturbing, but try not to be too disturbed when you see these unfamiliar patterns ripening. And patterns that you knew you had, being intensely magnified. And just finding yourself obsessing over things that you’d never even thought about before much.”



“At the beginning of the retreat we attempted to record our dreams, and frankly we found it took too long to write them out. We were spending forty-five minutes writing out our dreams and as we got better at it, it got more and more. As you start to record your dreams you start to remember more and more each day. We just, finally, decided it was too much time. And we started only recording very significant dreams.

“I think it’s important to recognize what Khen Rinpoche says about dreams. When people ask him, what he says is, ‘Oh if you have a bad dream just forget it. It doesn’t mean so much.’ Don’t worry about it. Don’t get all upset if you have a bad dream. If you have a good dream, Khen Rinpoche says then, you should feel really happy. If you dream about His Holiness you can feel all excited about it. That’s what he says about dream interpretation. That’s all he’ll ever tell anybody. If you have a bad one just forget it and leave it behind. If you have a good one then rejoice in it and think about the deeper meaning it might have.

“I have some deep dream state, I guess, around two or three or something like that. Getting up at three or three-thirty was an experience in learning more about my serious dreams because, in your normal life, you never get up purposely at three-thirty. So you never break what I would consider deep dreams, serious dreams.

“I found a deep vulnerability to negative influences during semi-waking states or shallow dream states. Like I would have doubts or worries or paranoias—all these sorts

of things that I didn't have when I was working in corporate life. Then I would just fall dead asleep at eleven o'clock and wake up at five or six and go and get back to work. Here, your mind is so subtle. You're like half awake. Your sleep becomes sort of half meditation, half sleep. And then your mind is vulnerable to outside influences."



"I think people who go into deep retreat, a long retreat, should be aware that you'll probably have more disturbing dream experiences, and don't try to explain it in a normal way when you come out of it. You might see an animal as a holy being. And then there's this tendency of your mind to rationalize it and try to figure out why it couldn't be a holy being. So I'd say watch out for that. If you get a taste of a vision, surrender to that vision, and don't try to rationalize it and make it something non-special because your rational mind will try to discount it. I found a lot of problems with what I call lesser vision, meaning seeing things as normal. Like, that would happen to me where I would get demon influence dreams, meaning negative dreams. Obviously, negatively influenced dreams when I was *lungy* or tired."

Distraction

"For the first year we didn't do any reading or writing or memorising or anything like that. It was a different kind of depth that I got in retreat during that, when we didn't have any other extracurricular activities. And if you can do it, I would recommend it. But you don't want to just hang out and waste your time and be all spacey. You really have to judge for yourself whether you need to start picking up a different book than your practice book, or you need to start doing a side project in the afternoons or whatever."



"One thing for me that I found out that was a distraction afterwards was I would always make tea and I would drink it before my meditation session. And what would happen I would always want to go the bathroom, you know, and it was like the biggest distraction. Do you want to meditate or do you want to run to the bathroom, you know? I went through this for a long long time until I realized that—the mind is really tricky—I was distracting myself from meditating... yeah, on purpose, from meditating. So you watch for that cup of tea that you take before you meditate because it's not worth it. It's not worth your meditation session."



"I believe that the Sunday thing is really, really good for us. We took our big bath in the afternoon. We took hours, two hours. We played some soft music. We ate. We overate on Sundays."



"I had this desire to like to start documenting all the amazing things that happened to me during retreat, like writing them down. And I realized that trying to make the documentation in itself became a distraction for me. I wasn't able to just, you know, be

here now and like experience the moment and experience the amazing thing. I had to step away from it and write about it and like remove myself from it one or two levels. And you remove yourself from the amazing thing if you do that, you know. You have to either be in it or be out of it. You have to make a choice, you know, and at certain point the documentation itself will become a distraction.”



“The reason I started gardening is because I was going crazy. I really literally was going crazy—it was like a really bad two-month period of my life, probably the worst two-month period I’ve ever had. Everything’s more intense in retreat, you know. And I took to this emergency gardening and, you know what, I didn’t care if anything grew. I just had to like go digging the earth for a little bit; you know, like I had to get outside and I had to breathe a little and I had to go dig in the earth and like it made me feel better and it’s exactly what I needed and it wasn’t a distraction for me. It made me like be able to stay in retreat. It made me get through those two months. And then after those two months when I watered things, they didn’t grow and the bunny came and ate them. I just let it go. And you have to deal with those emergency things, those emergency distractions. You have to be able to just let them go when you are not needed any more, you know.”



“There’s a point that you get to when there is really no such thing as distraction anymore and it’s really interesting. It’s like every single thing you do starts to becoming your practice and there is no way you could be distracted because you’re at a level where it’s like everything you do is a realization. Your yoga practice is giving you like this intense meditation experience and like your translation practice is like another meditation experience. You go outside to eat, and that’s a meditation experience—everything becomes meditation. And that’s the point where you really want to get there because then you don’t have to worry about whether you are distracted or not.”



“Something that really strikes me, because it seems like each one of the three-year retreaters had a totally different way of going about their practice and has a totally different threshold of like cushion time versus like embroidery time or novel time or like those kind of things and ... this is kind of a dangerous thing to say, but I want to say that I almost think that you don’t have to worry about distracting yourself because I almost think that the virtue of putting yourself in a three-year retreat would do the work. Like, it’s not really true and you shouldn’t really think that way—you should push yourself and you should do the work—but it’s almost like I feel like ... I can really relate to what the people are saying about where they got in their spiritual experiences. And it’s like we all seem to be coming out with almost exactly the same experiences and it’s like we all just did it in a really different way. And it almost seems like the virtue of three-year retreat, we’re kind of emerging in the same place.

“I don’t know, but it really seems to me like the three-year retreat brought a lot of development to us, like almost regardless of what our capacity was. Like I personally just don’t feel like I had that much of a capacity for practice but I feel like the results are

kind of amazing. And I just want to say that for those people who are kind of more hard on themselves than they should be. I don't think people should just take that and go with it, you know, and like spend their whole retreat painting their toe nails, you know. But I just wanted to say, like maybe not ... not to stress out too much over it.



“One of the most striking ones patterns was something that I saw in a book by Jack Kornfield. He mentions this man who meets Buddhism and he reads a lot of books and he decides that he is going to get enlightened. He's going to do deep retreat. So he goes to a solitary place and this beautiful cabin by this really nice stream. So he moves into the cabin. He gets all his provisions for six months and he sits down to meditate. And the first two days the stream is such a peaceful, sparkling sound, and by the end of the week all he can hear are marching band sounds. I don't know about anybody else but I'm an American. You know it's like, I got to hear “Stars and Stripes Forever”, over and over and over in my head and I didn't even have a stream. But this guy had to leave retreat because he ran out to the stream, he's trying to move the rocks around to get it to play a different song. It's just your head. Your head's going to play that stuff back to you.”



“I think a lot of distractions come from *lung* and that compulsiveness that people spoke about. It comes from having *lung*. Like I found myself fanatically cleaning the yurt—not just cleaning, but going through every single track between all the floors. I mean, you can't clean them, but I mean I was like scraping the stuff out so much that I got really huge bad blisters on my hands, that I didn't even notice, because I was like totally focused on this task which really didn't deserve that much focus, you know.

“And you really have to watch because when you have that little bit of *lung* and that little bit of compulsion, you can direct that energy to anything. And not everything is worthy of that much attention, you know. Like, yes, you want your yurt to be clean because you want your mind to be clean and stuff like that, but I mean, there is a limit. You know. And there are other things that you can do with your time. And you know, you'll get the twenty new project ideas and it's *lung*, you know—it's just this energy that you feel like you have to direct somewhere and you can put it back into your practice; you don't have to branch out, you know.”



“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.”

Dharma Friends and Partners

“Christie and I had a unique situation where we were staying together in a small yurt and I'd like to talk about what we did. On rare occasions perhaps other people will try

to do that, with a partner. And I think the first thing to say is, we tried a very interesting experiment which was that we made a decision that we wouldn't allow ourselves any space—we would always be in each other's face 24/7. We would be within a few feet of each other during the whole retreat. So it was an interesting experiment. I don't suggest it if you're not really dharma orientated and dharma motivated—I think it would be a disaster probably.

“We had this rule like I couldn't go out of the yurt if she didn't go out of the yurt; I couldn't be in the yurt if she wasn't in the yurt; and stuff like that. So we were always forced to be in close contact with each other, twenty-four hours a day. And there is a similar thing when you are with a lama, when you live with a lama like I did with Khen Rinpoche for almost twenty years. And that's a very similar thing, that goes on when you stay with your lama, which is that you make a decision that this being is divine. So going into that relationship, you decide this being is a divine being. Now, can I handle it to be close to them twenty-four hours a day?

“And what happens is you get into problems. You get into problems with the relationship where you want to leave—you want to get outside by yourself, take some space—and you don't allow yourself. You just go back to that divinity thing. You say, ‘It's a divine being so why do you need to go outside?’ And then that exercise was extremely difficult and extremely beneficial. And it was the same sort of feeling I got when I was with Khen Rinpoche. It's the exercise of deciding that this guru is a divine being and that you won't give yourself any space away from them. And you just learn to be like them and to learn to be with a divine being. Every time your mind wants to get space or go away or your mind gets claustrophobic or your mind gets dissatisfied, you just say, ‘This is a divine being and what are you going to do about it?’”



“I think you'll see that most spiritually inclined people have mental problems. Most people are spiritually inclined because they have some kind of mental instability. Swami Satyananda talks about it a lot. He says in India, a person with a certain kind of mental instability and spiritual inclination would be considered lucky. In a foreign country like America, that same person would be considered dangerous or problematic. So I think a certain amount of instability goes with spiritual inclination because you see suffering, you understand suffering, you are sensitive to suffering and, therefore, you're less stable. In trying to choose the people you're going into retreat with, try to appreciate that fact. Just because someone doesn't seem technically mentally stable more often than not brings a corresponding heightened spirituality that you do want in your retreat. So, you've got to take both together and take it knowingly.”



“I don't know how many people are going to have group three-year retreats or how many people are going to have totally solitary three-year retreats, but my experience was in a group retreat and with a very, very close friend nearby, in the retreat. So I'll just talk from my own experience because that's all I can do. And it really doesn't feel that I could have gotten through three-year retreat without her. There are a lot reasons; my experience was that three-year retreat is such a unique experience—like no one else

knows what a three-year retreat is like except someone who is in a three-year retreat with you. No one else in the world understands exactly what you are going through if they are not in a three-year retreat.

And therefore there is a lot to be said for doing a three-year retreat with other people, you know. We would all come together as a group, and somebody would come up with, 'I'm going through this'. And then everyone would just spark up and be like 'You are? Me too!' Of course this was in sign language, but it was just like such a relief, like, 'Ah, thank god, you know, I am not crazy.' And it was so reassuring."



"I think it's important to realize that all your problems are normally projected onto other people. You know, like, normally, you're going to blame other people for your problems rather than say it's you yourself. So even if you have some ancient problem with your parents, or your brothers and sisters, or a teacher, or a boss, or a spouse, or child, or anything, you're going to bring it into retreat. During the breaks it seemed like we projected especially onto other people. It's really welling up from your subconscious, because you've been working on your subconscious, and then your old problems come back. You don't have anyone to focus them on, so whoever you meet is going to be this enemy, this person you're going to focus all, project all your problems onto."



"I think especially in the beginning, I probably would have had misconceptions about where I was spiritually if I hadn't met other people during the breaks. I think it gives you a more accurate perception of where you are. You get these really amazing meditation experiences when you're really deep in retreat, and you think, 'Oh my god, I'm getting somewhere.' Then you meet someone during the break and you have all these horrible mental pictures and you're like, 'Oh my god, I'm just the same as I was before – worse maybe.'

And that really keeps your head down. It keeps you in perspective, and it makes you realise that it takes a long time to change your mind. You can't just do it in six months, overnight. You have to make a serious concerted effort through your entire life to change these terrible seeds in your head and create good ones in their place."

Joy, depression, magnified mental states

"I've never been really depressed in my whole life. I can't even remember a mild depression in my whole life. But on the first day of retreat, I went into a deep state of mental depression. It was on the hour of closing the *tsam* and I went into this thing, I've never had it in my whole life. I guess it's connected to the whole power of the retreat for me. I couldn't release the muscles in my face no matter what I did, and they were crushed together. And then I just went into this deep depression for like, I don't know, a day, a day-and-a-half, and I've never had that before. And expect that sort of thing when you're dealing with powerful forces, like trying to change your mind after a billion years or more.

“And it hit me like every six months during retreat or every four months. I would go into like a day-and-a-half or two days of just total darkness, total complete depression and I couldn’t do anything. And there’s nothing you can do much when you’re in it. I felt like I could say honestly that that was the first experience of pure mental illness in my whole life. And it was heavy; it was really, really heavy. And I couldn’t get out.

“If you can, take the magnified mental states with a grain of salt. I think a grain of salt is a big expression for retreat—the less you take yourself seriously, the better chance you have of it not getting worse at least. Any kind of humor or laughter is good. If you can find any excuse, laugh about something, and that will help a lot. And again, when you’re inside of it you can’t get out of it that easily. You know, whatever we tell you is not going to help you that much when you’re in it because by definition you can’t just step out of it, but at least you have the comfort of mind that others have been there. There’s some kind of energy going on in a deep retreat that you will have depressions and other mental negative mental states that you never even dreamed of.”



“I had two realizations —what I call joy in the face of adversity? Suddenly one day it just dawned on me that the only suffering you can really change is future suffering. You can’t do anything about your immediate suffering in this moment. So there’s absolutely no logic to be unhappy with it. And so on a few occasions I had this breakthrough where I just realized that no matter how tough it was or how bad I felt, it wouldn’t be any good to be unhappy and I should just do the best. If you’re being extremely logical and you understand karma and emptiness then the best thing—the only thing—you can do at any given time is to be totally joyful even in a midst of a terrible event. And that was a big thing for me and it worked a few times.”



“I wanted to say about lack of sleep. I think lack of sleep may be similar to depression in many cases—not all the time—in that when I can’t sleep I find that I focus on myself a lot. There’s a connection between focusing on yourself almost exclusively as you start to get desperate, and then all thoughts of others begin to vanish as the insomnia goes further and further into the night. And the focus on the other person becomes less and less. So I think it can be very useful to try—when you’re in the middle of it it’s almost impossible—but try to do *tonglen* or at least think of somebody else’s problems, briefly, and then sometimes that can help.”



“Again we found animals were a barometer of our mental state: if we were having a grump between us, or if we were having some kind of feeling bad, sad, mad, then animals wouldn’t come. They’d just go away. And the rabbit wouldn’t come that day. One time, when we had a quarrel, this huge beautiful cow came and just stood outside. We never saw him after that or before that. It was huge, incredibly beautiful cow that came and stood and looked at us for the longest time. Like, ‘What are you doing?’ They feel you. Your moods also impact on nature.”



“Our ballet teacher Alison-la said that her teacher, would praise them when they had a bad day, saying that that was the days when they advanced. And the days when things go smoothly you may not be advancing much. And I agree. I think it’s very important to keep that attitude about days when you’re struggling and to realize that that’s when you’re making progress.

“Abraham Lincoln in the middle of the Civil War—here’s this man who stopped at Gettysburg before his address to save a chick that had fallen out of a nest because he couldn’t stand to see it die. And here’s this man who was responsible to send hundreds of thousands of people to being maimed and killed and you could see what it did to his face over the three or four years, you could see in the photographs. And in the middle of this big strategy meeting for the battles he was crying and he said the best thing about this war is that will end some day. And that’s the only good thing I can see about this is that it will end one day. So I’ve always had that in mind when I’m having a hard time.”



“What struck me about His Holiness and people like him is that bodhicitta activity—at the point when you can give up your whole life to helping other people and that’s all you want to do for your whole life—then you get a sort of like a foundation happiness. You get this kind of happiness that never fades. And it never fluctuates. You have it all the time. And you don’t even notice it after a while I think. You run into people who are unhappy and then you notice it. That’s the kind of joy in retreat that I could see—that kind of joy and not at all the other kind. Not at all the being happy about accomplishments, or getting something or eating the right something or those things. The other one is just steady, constant and it will go with you forever. And so I don’t even think about the other ones too much. Almost never.”

Homework: What kind of communications vs. silence would you plan into a weekend retreat; a month-long retreat; a 3-year retreat? Don’t forget to plan for needs that come up, emergencies, etc.