



THE ASIAN CLASSICS INSTITUTE



DIAMOND MOUNTAIN UNIVERSITY

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

### Reading Seven: Daily Schedule

*Wake up and think, 'I'm still alive. Many people my age, and some of my friends and relatives have already died, but I am still alive.' Just be happy that you are alive. Then thinking that, determine to make the day meaningful.*

*Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Dec. 1999*

#### How to set up your day

"I stick to the four sessions. I get up at three and sleep during the day. For me, afternoon is worthless. I eat a big meal and then just sleep. I've never seen that in a text, but he says specifically that you have to respect your body's patterns."



"How long should you do each session for? Do it in keeping with your personal physical capacity and your own personal mental threshold. How strong is your desire to do this? Can you mentally keep yourself going for another half hour?"

"Don't do more than that. And I suggest breaking it into smaller sessions especially in the afternoon. The morning session is short because you spend an hour on getting the offerings, etc. Personally for me, that's the most powerful session. I think it's because I haven't had a lot of thoughts yet. So I try to get up really early, and then I sleep during the day."



"It takes me 45 minutes to one hour to get the altar ready every morning. Personal advice: I normally don't take too much time with my altar, but in retreat it's immaculate, and I spend hours on it. It's very satisfying, and it helps the retreat go very well. So I buy hundreds and hundreds of cookies, and every day I change them. I create a garbage bag full of cookies every day and leave them outside for kids and stuff. Make it

nice. Sweep the floor very meticulously, and then do your offerings. Spend a lot of time. This is the time when you have the time, and it helps the retreat a lot. It makes the retreat much more powerful. Take your time, as much time as you spend on buying your food, take that much time in buying your offerings. I buy \$200 worth of candles. I really blow it all out—make it beautiful. It makes the retreat a lot nicer.”



“When you start your first session, think of all the people in your life, in your family, and all sentient beings, and determine that you will do whatever it takes to help them. Even if there is one being left suffering in a hell realm, even for just one minute, that is intolerable, and you must do everything you can to help them.

“Make sure that you aren’t motivated by the eight worldly dharmas as you do your practice. Be very clear that your motivation is only to help others. No matter what happens, never give up your determination to help others.

“Then think, ‘I am going to die today. I am going to die right in the middle of my meditation session.’ Then even if you don’t die, still you won’t be wasting time.”

*[Advice from Lama Zopa Rinpoche  
to the Diamond Mountain 3-year retreaters  
Bodh Gaya, Dec. 1999]*



“We used to sit down before every *lerung* and decide on our daily schedule. I think that’s a very good idea. And we would keep modifying it, and experimenting with it, improving it, refining it, every *lerung*. So we had a ritual where we would sit down for maybe an hour, an hour and a half, and we would decide on our schedule for the next *lerung*. We would negotiate it.

“There’s a list of considerations that you have for your schedule and then you pretty much have to come out with the same schedule. And these were our considerations. They’ll be different for other people:

“We found that we needed a five-hour block of sleep. In other words, we would get up at three or four and do our heavy practices. We did our heaviest practices then, but then we would go back for a nap maybe at nine or something like that, seven to nine.

“But what we found out was that you’ve got to have a five-hour block. You can’t do like three hours, three hours, three hours, something like that. Apparently, I think, to get into some state of dream, REM sleep or something, you need—we needed—at least a five-hour block of sleep. Our yoga teacher was a little surprised that we even had that little. You find out what you need—and Petra mentioned that Gen Lamrimpa said, ‘Just sleep as much as you need. Don’t short yourself on sleep. It will drive you crazy.’ It’s not good for your health. You’re not out in the working world.

“When I was in corporate life I would make up that sleep on the weekends and I would drink coffee during the day to keep myself awake. And that just runs your health over

a period of time. That's not something you can do in retreat. You can't have that kind of compulsive behavior during retreat.

"We had to carefully think about our post-food hours, because you eat and then your mind dulls out for like an hour and a half to two hours. So we came up with some interesting things that I think might help other people. One was that on a midday meal, we would chant after the meal. We would practice, we would chant Sanskrit chants because we were learning Sanskrit. We got an Indian drum which you don't have to finger—you just hit the notes. Anybody can play it. And we would play that.

"So one person would play that. The other person would do the chant. And then we would trade off chant. Like, I would chant one line and she would chant one line. We did that almost every day and we learned a lot of verses. We learned one and a half major texts that way which we've now forgotten, but it's mostly there.

"It was just a fun way and it was a way to handle your post-meal blues. And then again in the evening we just found that, we pressed our evening meal back as far as we could so that we might do some light reading about what we were practicing, and then we would just conk out."



"I had an amazing joy about getting up at three and three-thirty in the morning. It's so beautiful. It's such a perfect time for meditation. I think that anybody who is doing a retreat should try at least to experience that. And the first week or so it'll probably be hard to get yourself up out of bed but then after a while it just becomes so natural that you couldn't sleep if you wanted to.

"You wake up before the alarm goes off because you're like, 'Oh, three o'clock.' Your body has an internal clock that gets better when you're in meditation, and it'll get you up. And then the mind space at that time is so quiet. Maybe it's because nobody else is awake at that time—because all the night animals have called it a night by then and all the morning animals haven't gotten up yet. And it's the same for people. So that the world is just really still and it's the best time for meditation."



"I completely agree about that really special early morning time. For me it was just so incredible that, three-thirty or four, to do a session before dawn or at least get a good start before dawn. And I would find if I would oversleep for whatever reason—either on purpose or by accident—I just felt kind of cheated out of that time. It was such a special time. Even though I had the same amount of practice time for the rest of the day because I'd adjust everything else, not having that pre-dawn time just kind of threw everything off for me.

"For me, I'm really a morning person. I have a lot of energy in the morning so I did lots of practice in the morning, just kind of straight through from four am to noon. I just sort of did back-to-back practice. I did all my exercise in the morning. I usually did about a hundred prostrations a day and I did all of them in the morning, plus my yoga.

“So I found for me to barrel through for the whole morning—with back-to-back practice and all my exercise—worked. Then I would eat my main meal at noon and have a break after eating. I’d usually go for a walk and then maybe lie down for a little while. Sometimes I’d sleep, sometimes I’d lie down and doze or space out for a little while.”



“I really enjoyed experimenting with the different times of the day and what different meditations worked during different times of the day. I found that really interesting.

“I found that the pre-dawn time was the best period for *jo gom*, or fixed meditation, because my mind was so still. I could just stay there for a really long period of time, longer than any other time of the day. Also I had the most energy at that time. I think that’s the most exhausting kind of meditation that you can do. It’s the most intense for me.

“I found that evenings were really good for *shar gom* meditations, or visualizations that go through step-by-step, because your mind is at the most imaginative in the evenings for some reason. It’s just like your fantasy side of your winds is more active in the evenings so you can really embellish things, and really get into them.

“I found that noon was probably the hardest time for me to meditate and I usually did mostly *che gom* meditation—analytical meditation—then because the mind is very analytical in the middle of the day, for me at least.

“And then at night I was usually pretty tired and we had already eaten a big meal. We would usually do like a fifteen minute rejoicing meditation, or thanksgiving. Something really, really light that would make your heart feel really good before you went to sleep.

“And I think it’s really important to do that meditation. Sometimes we would skip it but it really does make your heart feel good to go to sleep. You should always go to sleep on some kind of good note like that because your sleep becomes really intense when you’re in meditation. You’re only half asleep most of the time. So everything that happens in your dream world affects you strongly. When I’m not in retreat I don’t remember any of my dreams, I sleep so soundly. But here I can’t sleep. I can’t sleep very well; I just sleep on like this edge of wakefulness every night, and so it’s really important to put yourself to bed in a good frame of mind.”



“You’ve got to schedule food for *asana* practice, and if you’re doing pranayama, you’ve got to schedule your meals so that your stomach—our stomachs were empty for about maybe twelve hours before *asana* practice. Something like that—just because we would not eat in the early morning and we would eat the night before. We found for us that digesting at night while you sleep was better; was for us a more productive use of time than blowing some of the day. But our yoga teacher said in his opinion, the body should rest during that time. So I think there’s two schools of thought. For us, we found digesting during sleep was the most efficient use of our time.”

“I think it’s very important not to pack your day too tightly when you’re doing the schedule. I think you need to give yourself time for relaxation in transition periods. Because there were two of us we had to make more of a rigid schedule than someone who’s only one and could relax whenever they felt like it.

“Like the first year we weren’t even communicating at all. Once we set our schedule we would just do the schedule. We wouldn’t be like, ‘Oh, what do you want to do next?’ I mean there was no communication. We didn’t write to each other. We didn’t make little funny hand movements to each other, except for maybe at dinner sometimes. That was like our release period. Because we realized that two people was less intense inherently than one person, we really strove to make it very strict in the communication. And we were very internal most of the time—we kind of slacked off during the last year to tell you the truth, then but we were starting to come out.

“After a few years we started needing a little bit more communication. I think everybody here did. I think people in general started talking to each other more, maybe writing notes to other people more, or seeing each other during ritual periods, but before that we were stricter. So our transition periods—we had to adjust that, because we weren’t thinking that we would need half an hour to go to the bathroom, but sometimes you do. Sometimes you just need to not stress out.

It’s a balance. You want to use your time wisely. And you want to not waste the efforts that all these people have made to bring you here. But, at the same time, you don’t want to... you want a balance between effort and grace I guess. It comes up in every single topic here, but the schedule was probably the biggest one for us.”



“Later, I think in a long-term retreat, three years, you get into a fatigue factor because it accumulates and you should realize that—a person doing a long retreat. 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 used to set two alarm clocks one fifteen minutes earlier than the other, like three-fifteen and three-thirty. And when the three-fifteen went off we would start our waking meditation. Like I would go through all my getting-up yoga, and I found that very useful. And I did my motivation for the day, and stuff like that and what I was going to work on that day. I thought that was a cool part of our schedule.”

“I forgot to mention, I tried to do a *chu lam kyī nyeljor* every day, which means an everyday yoga. Like I would pick something during that day to concentrate on. Like I would try to be Vajra Yogini every time I went to the door. I would connect it to some every day activity. I would choose one and I would actually write it down in my book. Or I would try to concentrate on a certain channel during the first half of the day every time I had a one-minute break or two-minute break. Every time I was between things I would go back to that channel, or that *pranayana*, or that *tong len* to somebody.

“We did also a thing of picking a person every day—every single day. And usually I picked one from my dreams the night before and I would do *tong len* on them all day, breaks in the day. So these are everyday yoga. I think it’s very powerful, very beautiful.

“When my mind was strong, and I don’t think it’s wise when you have *lung*, I would recite Scriptures in my mind. When I was doing the altar in the morning or making the fire or something like that, or eating, then I would recite the ten verses or fifteen verses or something. But I found when you have *lung* that’s a bad idea. You have to judge—when your mind is fresh and strong, you can do that kind of thing. And of course it’s good to do mantras, to do your heart mantra all day long if you can.

### **Gakyay and other breaks**

“We took a break every Sunday, even in *lerung*. We didn’t do yoga or meditation on Sundays. We just did mantras, and I think after the first year-and-a-half, we started listening to tapes of teachings. That was really nice, to get a needed rest on Sunday. It’s like a small *gakyay*—you get a rest and then you’re able to really to kick butt on the next week. I think you really need to look at it as the best way of serving others. You take a break because you need it, because that’s the best way that you can serve others, by doing your practice even better the next week”



“I agree that two weeks is probably a good limit for breaks. I think a month was also way too long and I think that I lost a lot of ground after the *gakyays*. And I think that it caused some tensions that didn’t need to be there, because people were starting to get bored or restless. I think we could avoid it by having a shorter break.

“Usually in the first two weeks everybody’s pretty happy, and then after two weeks, we start getting grumpy and things start coming up. The care ladies accidentally give us a financial report in the mail or something like that. If you only had two weeks maybe you could avoid that.”



“I think there are certain practices that you have to continue doing in the break month—that you lose if you don’t keep them up. Some practices I think it’s good to take a month off or two weeks, or whatever you’re going to do. It’s good to take that time off and not do them, but there are certain practices that need a daily maintenance, like yoga or other movement things that we did. If you lay off for more than four or five days you lose so much ground that you can’t get back into very easily. So I think you have to distinguish. You have to do a maintenance practice during the breaks.

“We started, after the first year, to have a teacher come during the breaks, who would speak to us and we wouldn’t speak to them. We had a dance teacher. Later we had some special yoga teachers come. And I think in general that was okay, although I think you have to do it wisely. You have to have good rules and the person has to understand what it’s all about. To have someone expert come in and help you with a

specific practice that you're doing I think can be very useful. But I think you have to do it wisely.

"Last thing: during breaks we would do our house repairs. We would save all the busy stuff. We wouldn't do any kind of physical repairs on the yurt unless we had to for safety or health. We saved all that stuff for breaks."

### **Special occasions**

"When we started out we said we wouldn't recognize each other's birthdays and we wouldn't recognize secular holidays. And then later—this last Christmas was pretty weird. We got tons of stuff that came in, and we started to feel this pressure of giving a gift to one of the other retreatants.

"I don't think it's a good idea really. In the long run I don't think it's a good idea. It got a little out of hand for us. And then trying to remember people's birthdays... First we said no birthdays. And that's lonely, for people who are alone especially. And Christmas is lonely. Maybe something light on Christmas, like a midnight mass or prayer if you're in a break month—things that you are culturally very attached to. But I think in general, to get into the thing of heavy gift giving and Christmas giving and stuff like that, I don't think it's desirable."

### **Adjusting practice to experience**

"One of our yoga teachers, David, said the willingness to experiment is crucial. We can't tell you anything definite. It all depends on your personality and your bodily make up, and other things. You have to be willing to shift things around, try different things to find the best things for you. Be creative. Find fun ways to make your practice interesting. That's a big challenge. And again the balance between adjusting your practice when you really need to and then sticking with your old practice. There's nothing we can tell you about it except use your wisdom and 'don't miss the milkman'."

### **Tips on keeping your schedule**

"To help get up in the morning, do it for the sake of others. Use two alarm clocks set apart 15 minutes—no joke. Try putting the second one out of reach on the floor. Also it may be that you honestly need the rest, and don't beat yourself up about it.

"If your mind feels foggy after a nap, do a bit of yoga, like sun salutations and shoulder stands. Schedule physical tasks like doing the altar or cleaning after nap time so you don't go into meditation groggy.

"If you find that you are sleeping more than before, remember what we are doing in the mind is very exhausting. We are leading a very healthy lifestyle in a very pollution-free place, and it's normal for healthy people to sleep more. Don't beat yourself up; you can't meditate well if you don't sleep as much as you feel you need.

“Part of a bodhisattva's training is to learn how to kick back and totally relax, knowing that it will help you help others much better after you have taken a well deserved rest.”

### **Vows and their relationship to practice and meditation**

“Every time in the *Kangyur, Tengyur*, the word used to refer to vows means, ‘This is the root of all attainment.’; And I thought that was kind of cool, and I think of vows that way. If you understand worldview, if you understand emptiness, then your vows are not only affecting your meditation, they determine your meditation. I think if ACI is nothing else and Diamond Mountain is nothing else, it's the fact everything is being spewed out of your heart *tig le*, and that's coming from your vows. So that means your reality is coming from your vows.

“So in my idea, there are Praktimoksha vows, which basically for me is not harming other people; and that is an emphasis on negative, not harming other people. And then bodhisattvas' vows, and I see that as giving—beginning with giving positive actions to help all beings. And then your relationship to your guru, lama—tantric vows. So I think you have to concentrate on those three flavors.

“And we did our book, we did our six-time book, through the whole retreat very well. It wasn't perfect every day, but it was perfect most days. We took six periods of the day—we actually stopped, we actually did the book carefully, and then we went on with our activities. And also I think on a long retreat you've got to watch being sincere on the book, and also you're going to have to get into free association on the verbal bad deeds because you are not speaking. So you have to write things that you were thinking ... you were saying in your head. Don't get mechanical about it and don't get sloppy on it.

“We also did *sojong* very carefully. We didn't dis *sojong*; we did it very carefully. In the afternoon we cut out the best and the worst from the last two weeks from our book and then we showed it to each other, which is an important part of *sojong*, I think. And then we looked at it again, each person by themselves, looked at each item again. And then we put them in an envelope and in the evening we did nice offerings to the Buddhas and the bodhisattvas—you invite them to come to *sojong*. Sometimes we did it outside when the weather was okay—we did a nice fire in the garbage can—which works. We put bricks under it and we were very careful about the sparks and stuff. And then we just did it very slow. And we had a good time with it, and then we had refreshments. We asked for special cocoa, we would ask for donuts or we would ask for popcorn. It made *sojong* special—we got to the good part—we would reward ourselves.

“And then I think one thing, really important, we did about our vows was we would pick the one issue that I wanted to work on for the next two weeks. So out of all the *sojong* items I would pick the one that was most disturbing to me and I wanted to work on for the next two weeks and I had a theme for the next two weeks, *sojong* theme. And then every morning when I get up I think about that.

“Also about vows, if you can take vows before you go into retreat I think it's very powerful. I mean, one of the first things I learnt from the Mongolian lamas from

Howell was ... oh, I was talking to a lama, this ancient Kalmuck lama, blind. I told him I didn't eat meat and he said, 'Well did you take a vow?'

"And I said, 'No, I just don't eat it.'

"And then he said, 'But you've got to take a vow because it's more powerful'. He said, 'You don't get the whole mileage out of it if you just don't do it.'

"If you make a vow not to do it for the rest of your life, then you get real mileage out of it, then the karma is very powerful. So I think as much as a person can take vows, even if it's just lifetime laymen's vows. Or if you can get ordained, or take your bodhisattva vows, or take your tantric vows, and then go into retreat with the vows, then taking a vow not to do something you would normally wouldn't do anyway, is infinitely more powerful karmically."



### **Sample Daily Schedule—solitary retreat:**

- 3:30 Up, brush teeth, tea, set up six-time book  
*Dakkye* first part short version (40 min.)
- 4:30 One hour deep meditation  
45 min. setting up altar  
Pranayama from Iyengar (15 min.)  
Mantra session or memorizing (Yoga Sutra)
- 7:00-9:00 Nap, bath or other rest activities
- 9:00-10:00 Second meditation session (emptiness meditation or *shamatha*.)
- 10:00-11:00 Yoga
- 11:00-1:00 Cook and eat lunch, clean up
- 1:00-2:00 Chant yoga sutra or heart sutra in Sanskrit, Hatha Yoga Pradipika
- 2:00-2:45 Session 3.1 Focused visualization 45 min.
- 2:45-3:15 Exercise (dance?)
- 3:30-4:15 Session 3.2 as above.
- 4:30-5:30 Walk outside in the fresh air.
- 5:30-6:30 Dinner and clean up
- 6:30-8:00 Pranayama in the evenings (15 min.), mantras or walking at night

8:00-9:00 Session 4—finish *dakkye*  
Thanksgiving meditations or spiritual revisionism of past



### Sample Group Retreat Daily Schedule (adapted from Lam Rim retreat)

5:00–6:00 am First meditation session —*jok gom* (fixed meditation)  
6:00–6:30 Tea and bathroom break  
6:30–8:00 Yoga  
9:00–10:00 Second meditation session—*shar gom* (review meditation) on current class material  
10:00-11:00 Tibetan hypertexting class using *De Lam*  
11:00–12:00 Silent study / cooking  
12:00–12:30 Lunch  
12:30-1:00 Cleaning dishes and house  
1:00–5:00 Work service (and rest as needed)  
5:00–6:00 Meditation—*che gom* (analytical meditation) on a concept from class  
6:00–6:45 Dinner and cleanup  
7:00–8:00 Last meditation—*Jorcho* (note: *jorcho* is an offering to the lineage lamas of the tradition, usually done in the morning, but we found it worked better for us to do it at night.)

*Homework: Design retreat schedules for a weekend retreat, for a month-long retreat, for a group retreat, etc. Have fun and use your imagination.*