

On Retreat:

Befriending Who Shows Up When We're Alone

In late June of 1974, I drove a few hours from my home to the town of Barre in rural western Massachusetts. An old mansion north of the town center had recently become home for the new Insight Meditation Society (IMS).

For several years I'd been trying unsuccessfully start a meditation practice. So I decided to leap head-first into a ten-day retreat. That should give me some instruction and momentum.

When I walked into the entry hall, I saw the daily schedule on a bulletin board. It included sitting meditations, walking meditations, eating meditations (i.e. meals), working meditation (that first year my "yogi job" was to do an hour of grounds-keeping every morning), dhammā talk in the evening, group interviews, and so forth. Everything was laid out neatly from before dawn until after dark.

I copied it down carefully and took it to my room so I'd know when and what I was supposed to do.

During the opening session, the retreat manager went over the schedule and described all our routines and rules: silence, meal procedures, entering and leaving the meditation hall, individual interviews, etc. The days were designed to create a space of solitude and communal support for cultivating meditation.

A week and a half later when I left, I thought it was the most meaningful thing I'd ever done. And I was glad I'd never have to do it again.

Nevertheless, a year later I was drawn back to do another retreat. I was hooked. I've done one or two communal retreats a year for over 45 years.

Solo Retreats

Ram Dass, a spiritual teacher, had steered me toward IMS. He also steered me toward a very different style of retreat. His suggestion was simple: go into a room, close the door, and do nothing for 24 hours. Taking a little food was fine. But bring nothing to read or write or listen to. Just be alone with the mind and observe what happens.

There was a small room with a single window in the attic of the house where my wife and I lived. I didn't take any food — it was my custom to fast one day a week back then. So a little water was enough. I left a few times to go to the bathroom, but otherwise stayed in the attic room. I also took a journal, but confined myself to only writing a few notes about my immediate experience.

There was no schedule on a bulletin board for me to follow. So I meditated a little. I stretched and exercised a little. I caught up on my sleep. But all together, that took up less than 12 hours. The rest of the time I was simply alone and unchaperoned with my mind-heart.

I found it so helpful that I've done quite a few of these solo-retreats over the years.

Hybrid Retreats

These two styles of retreat represent opposites on a spectrum. On one end is the large, communal setting with lots of yogis, social rules, and a detailed schedule that give implicit support and structure. On the other end is a solitary, unstructured experience, with nothing to buffer or manage what comes into the mind-heart. We are alone with whatever shows up inside.

There are many other valid styles of retreat that combine elements of communal and solitary retreats. The goals are the same: befriending our experience. But the various settings create different fields of supports and distractions.

The advent of the internet, email, and video conferencing have created a new hybrid that combines elements of both communal and solitary experiences. The coronavirus and need for social distancing have encouraged us to look more deeply and creatively at ways to get both the solitude and support while staying relatively safe from the risk of the pandemic.

This tension between the solitary and the communal is not new. In the Buddha's day, it was customary for yogis to do long periods of meditating alone in a cave or kuti (meditation hut). At the same time, the Buddha said the number one support for the dhammā is the sangha or the community of fellow seekers.

On-Line Retreats

On-line retreats are one of the hybrids that combine communal and solo retreats. Typically we are alone. There may be others in our household who are not on retreat. But we are not physically on location with a sangha of fellow seekers.

Yet video technology make it possible

to be in a virtual sangha with others who show up in postcard (or postage stamp) sized images on a computer screen where we can talk together and share our practice experience.

We are just learning how to combine these elements and just beginning to appreciate the values and difficulties of this hybrid. The world is always changing. It's up to us to explore the possibilities of how to best use these circumstances.

Questions to Take to Heart

As the time of our retreat together and apart approaches, I don't pretend to know what is best for each of you. But I will pretend to know some questions that may be worth contemplating. I suggest that you not try to figure these questions out intellectually but take them deep into the mind-heart and see what they stir intuitively.

How do I relate to the people around me?

During the retreat you may be living in a home with other people or pets. It's best to talk with the people (in age-appropriate ways) about what you are doing, the value to you of having time alone, and how you can be mutually supportive of each other during the retreat time. There are no single answers that are best for everyone. But communication helps.

How do I deal with distractions?

In a Himalayan cave or meditation center, televisions, radios, cellphones, computers, books, etc. are less likely to be sitting around clamoring for your attention. At home, they may be in your face. What can you do wisely to lessen these distractions? There may be some you have to pay attention to. But for every yogi who says, "I'm sorry I missed that call," there are 20 who say, "I wished I'd turned the phone off." So contemplate

what you need to attend to and what you can set aside and how to do it.

How else can I make my environment supportive of meditation?

Beyond being in wise relationship with those people and creatures around you, are there other things you can do with your environment to make it supportive of deepening practice?

How do I structure my day?

Parts of the day will be structured by on-line connection with the virtual sangha — the yogis on retreat with you. But there will be other stretches where you are on your own. Contemplate from the depth of your heart how much or how little structure might be helpful for you and what the elements might be.

How do I get meals?

I don't recommend fasting even though I have done so myself on retreat. Meditation takes energy. If your body energy runs low, the mind more easily falls into sloth and torpor. So think about how to get the nourishment you need without the preparation being too time consuming.

How much do I meditate?

One of my teachers, Bhante Vimalaramsi, suggested that a good minimum amount of sitting time on retreat is six hours a day. I've done a lot more than that on most retreats. There are groups that lead successful on-line retreats that suggest a minimum of three hours.

There are no clear answers that fit everybody and every situation. But it can help to look deeply into the mind-heart and ask. And if you need to be flexible, that's okay too. Just bring as much wisdom and as little distortion as you can

to this question.

Where can I do walking meditation?

Walking meditation can be an important part of the practice. If nothing else, it can release tension while you stay mindful. Depending on your setting, it may help to think of about where you can do walking meditation?

How much do I exercise?

Evolution designed our bodies to run. That's why we don't have a lot of fur — our skin is exposed so when we run, we can cool off more quickly. Some stretching and exercise can help the body and mind settle. How do you want to deal with exercise?

How much flexibility is wise in my routine?

There is value in having a set schedule so you know what to do next without having to fret about it. There can also be value in having flexibility so that can you adapt to the reality of the moment. How much steadiness and how much flexibility might be optimal for you?

These are a few of the questions that can be helpful to reflect upon as we approach a retreat. It can also be helpful to ask others about their experience. But in the end, you want to take the questions into the intuitive heart and listen to how the heart might guide you.

And if no clear answer arises, that's okay. Take your best shot, try something, see what the results are, and, if necessary, try something else. Like a path through the mountains, often the road to wisdom twists one direction and then other. Trail and error is a valid path to deeper understanding.