

A SIMPLE-AS-POSSIBLE HOW-TO GUIDE FOR

# *Doing Personal Retreat*



PLANNING AND CONDUCTING A PERSONAL PRACTICE RETREAT

*Lama Lekshe*

*Your mind is spinning around about carrying out a lot of useless projects: It's a waste! Give it up! Thinking about the hundred plans you want to accomplish, with never enough time to finish them just weighs down your mind. You're completely distracted by all these projects, which never come to an end, but keep spreading out more, like ripples in water. Don't be a fool: for once, just sit tight.*

*-Dza Patrul Rinpoche in Advice from Me to Myself*



## FIRST THINGS FIRST

# WHAT IS A PERSONAL RETREAT?

In the context of this booklet, personal retreat is a self-guided retreat. You might be practicing at a retreat center, in a tent in the wilderness or in your home. You might practice alone, or you might have a practice partner in the room next door. Your retreat might be a few hours, days, weeks or months. If you are a busy parent or you have a career, you might be carving out precious time while the rest of your family is on vacation or at summer camp. You might be listening to audio recordings of a teacher from a retreat you've already attended, practicing something you already know or learning from a dharma book.

Whether your retreat is an hour or a week, you'll need some structure. Creating a schedule, being intentional about the content and making some commitments to retreat discipline will help develop positive habits around practice for the present and the future. This little booklet is designed to help you create and manage a workable, positive retreat that will leave you enthusiastic about your next endeavor. In the beginning of practice, it's good to have the guidance of a teacher or mentor to help you shape each retreat. But in many dharma centers, teachers are short of time to go into much detail about planning a personal retreat. Some people don't have easy access to a teacher.

This booklet is not meant in any way to substitute for face-to-face guidance, it's meant to supplement it.



# THE BENEFITS OF A PERSONAL RETREAT

There are many benefits to doing personal retreat. Among them are

- If done right, personal retreat strengthens discipline and confidence in practice.
- Personal retreats keep gas in your spiritual tank.
- Almost no matter what happens on retreat, the aspirations and willingness to do retreat is supportive to a life of practice.
- On personal retreat, you can go deeper into practices you're already practicing.
- Personal retreats are one way of keeping current on practice commitments.
- Personal retreats done at home model keeping spiritual life a priority for family members.
- Personal retreats give you time to withdraw from a hectic life and to refocus on life values and spiritual well-being.
- Personal retreats can create more space and means for emphasizing the direct experience aspect of practice, as opposed to the conceptual side.
- Personal retreats allow time to study, contemplate and mediate on a practice—all in one setting.
- Personal retreats may allow more time for focus on the Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind and other preliminary practices.
- Personal retreats provide a means for a student to shift the responsibility for their spiritual practice from others to themselves.
- Personal retreats give a positive way to use old age, sickness and death as we age.
- When done with others, personal retreats strengthen connections among community members.

# ACCUMULATING MERIT FOR RETREAT

To accumulate merit means to gather the causes and conditions to practice in the future. It may seem like an exotic concept, but the concept simply acknowledges the interconnectedness of how things are. For example, if you give offerings to the dharma center, you gather merit. No one at the center knows you've given—so how can you gather merit? It's meritorious because when you make an offering to the dharma, you increase the odds of practicing in future by doing something that causes you to feel connected to the dharma, the dharma center and the people there. If you recite aspiration prayers, you also gather merit. It's not that some invisible third party tracks your recitations. It's more that as you recite the prayers, you speak and hear the aspirational speech of whoever wrote the prayer and you possibly feel inspired to engage in the aspiration yourself. Our recitation of prayers helps us see and experience the connection to wisdom and compassion that is actually always there. When we practice with the sangha on the weekends, we gather merit. How? Our presence and collaboration with community members and with the Buddhas and bodhisattvas opens us to their spiritual influence.

For offerings to be effective, there needs to be an object, an offering and an intention. When we visualize the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, for example, and offer prayers of supplication with the sincere wish that all beings benefit, all three of those conditions are met. Even in this act of giving a non-substantial offering such as a prayer, our mind is gently turned towards the dharma. Since the gift is not a material object, we have less attachment, and are more likely to experience pure generosity, which shapes our sense of giving.

# ACCUMULATING MERIT FOR RETREAT

By the same token, when we do make a material offering, we offer the energy that it took to acquire the thing, the thing itself and the intention to benefit others. All these actions affect our sentiment towards the dharma and practice. We develop the propensity to practice, the propensity to exert generosity and a sense of appreciation towards the dharma and those who exemplify, teach and practice it.

But offerings are only one of many ways to accumulate merit. Others include performing acts of kindness or any paramita (generosity, patience, and so on) or generating any wholesome thought. We can also accrue merit by honoring others, offering service, causing others to do good deeds, or by rejoicing in the merit of others. Merit is accrued when listening to teachings, when sharing the authentic dharma and when making it possible for others to teach or to hear the dharma. Spend some time considering how you might begin laying the groundwork for your next personal retreat by recognizing, contemplating and performing acts of merit.



# BEFORE STARTING

## CHOOSING THE CONTENT AND PRACTICES FOR THE RETREAT

How do you decide which topics to study and practice in your retreat? Use this list to get you started.

- Ask your meditation teacher.
- Consider commitments you've made and whether you might like to spend some time maintaining them
- Consider what you experience as obstacles to your practice—things like lack of patience, lack of faith, motivation, lack of connection to the lineage and so on—and put together a retreat designed to counteract the obstacle. You might need some guidance for that.
- Consider setting aside some time to deepen your understanding and experience of a practice you already do.
- Consider a retreat to master the mechanics (the liturgy, concepts, mudras or music) of a practice so that you can focus more on the meaning in the future.
- Choose a practice or practices that you find inspirational.
- Choose a practice that your community members are doing, so that you can engage in the practice together in the future.

# BEFORE STARTING

## OR ASK YOURSELF THESE QUESTIONS

- What kind of practices am I most comfortable with?
- Which can I do without guidance?
- What aspirations do I have for my practice?
- Do I have any mental or physical limitations to consider?
- Am I prone to loneliness, depression or other challenges that indicate that I need to titrate certain practice experiences into my day?
- Or do I have physical limitations such as arthritis that mean I do best when I balance sedentary time with physical activity like stretching or walking?
- How much time can I commit to this retreat?
- How much isolation or privacy do I need for this practice and how much am I likely to get on this retreat?

*Go into retreat with a beginner's mind, and don't expect anything. Expectation is premeditated disappointment. Whatever you think will happen probably won't. Be prepared to embrace whatever arises, and remember that meditation is habituating to openness. If nothing happens, that's fine. If everything happens, that's also fine. You may not get what you want from retreat, but you tend to get what you need.*

*—Andrew Holecek, 'Before You Go on Retreat'*



# CHOOSING A PLACE

ONE OF THE POSSIBLE LUXURIES ON RETREAT IS SOLITUDE—BUT NOT ALWAYS

Kyabje Trulshik Rinpoche explains three kinds of solitude supportive for retreat:

1. The outer solitude of the physical environment.
2. The inner solitude of one's own body.
3. The secret solitude within one's mind.

The outer solitude is easy to understand. Some quiet is helpful. Your retreat place doesn't need to be perfectly silent, but a door that closes can be a real support for settling the mind.

The inner solitude of one's own body refers to staying alone. When we are alone, we're less likely to give rise to conflicting emotions. Even when you do personal retreat, you may find it helpful to do individual practice sessions alone.

The third solitude, the secret solitude within one's mind, is the most important and the first two are a support for the third. Even if you have managed to get a room alone, if you spend the time planning your work or plotting out how to seek revenge, there will be no solitude within your own mind, and the retreat will be less fruitful.

# CHOOSING A PLACE

## 5 QUALITIES OF A GOOD RETREAT PLACE

In the Sutra-alamkara, the “Ornament of the Sutras” by Maitreya and Asanga, an ideal retreat site should have five qualities. It should be:

- Comfortable
- Important things like food, clothes, water, and so on should be easily obtained.
- Safe - There should no danger of robbers, wild animals, violence and so on.
- Healthy - It should not be a place conducive to injury or illness.
- Supportive - There should be people nearby who understand what you’re doing and who support you.
- Quiet - Interruptions and distractions should be minimal.

If you’ve done practice at a retreat center, consider all the attributes of the facility, procedures and policies that were meant to create the five qualities of place mentioned In the Sutra-alamkara. The retreat was probably in an isolated place. It was probably clean and quiet. You were probably discouraged from use of mobile devices and the Internet and staff were probably trained to support your retreat with the least interruption possible.

This list of qualities for a positive retreat site was written a long time ago. It’s helpful to put them into today’s context. You’re likely not at risk of disease or danger from wild animals in your own home. But you might be wise to choose a place and time where you feel at ease. If you are in a difficult relationship or exhausted from caring for your family, you might remove yourself to do retreat in a place where you can actually relax a little.

# CHOOSING A PLACE

Having considered all this and chosen a place supportive to a good retreat, it's important then to let go of expectations.

If your family said they wouldn't interrupt you and they do, it won't help your retreat to spend all your sessions complaining to yourself about it.

If the place you're staying said they have showers and you find out you only get a shower every other day, it's good to incorporate your disappointment about that into your practice.

Once the retreat begins, use whatever arises as practice. If you experience disappointment, spend your time being present with the emotion and your role in creating it. This will be more productive than making a list of people to blame—even if it was their fault



# SETTING A SCHEDULE

## STRUCTURE IS A KIND OF FREEDOM

The most common thing people ask when they are new to planning a personal retreat is, “How much practice should I do?” The answer, of course, depends on what kind of meditation you’re doing, how much experience you have and several other things. But here are some guidelines:

- If you are new to personal retreat, start building a schedule with 2-3 hours of formal, seated meditation practice at most.
- Add “flex time” sessions, where you can do more meditation if you feel like it.
- This way, when you commit to the schedule, you are committing to a modest amount of practice, but you have the option to do much more. If you find at some point you are fatigued or not feeling well, you also have the option to rest or to do some moderate exercise to help you mend. In this way, you have the freedom to do as much formal practice as you like, but you are not breaking your practice commitments if you do only the three hours. As you become more experienced, you can raise the number of hours of commitment, according to your ability. But remember, the idea is to finish retreat feeling inspired to do it again.

The second most often asked question about schedule is, “When should I start my practice day?” In part, the start time might depend on how long your retreat is. On a shorter retreat, you may not be able to get up much earlier than your regular rising time, because there is no time for the body to adjust. There’s no sense in making yourself so sleep deprived that you can’t maintain a clear mind. On the other hand, on a longer retreat, you will probably get rested and might easily find that you can adjust the rising time earlier and earlier.

# SETTING A SCHEDULE

- It's interesting that as we settle into a longer personal retreat, free of interruptions and distractions, you may need much less sleep. Or you may find that a short nap mid-day allows you practice late into the night and still get up early.
- Even if you like to start your day with a shower or tea, consider just a small amount of practice the moment you wake up. A brief session of refuge, bodhicitta and a little Shamata, closed with a brief dedication takes only a few minutes and it sets an intention for the day.
- That said, there is something wonderful about getting in a practice session or two before dawn, if your body allows it. To go to your morning meal knowing you have done a significant amount of practice can be inspiring and sends a clear message from you to yourself about your priorities. A morning of practice infuses itself into the hours that follow. And practice before bed, sets a trajectory for experience during sleep and waking.
- Mix sedentary sessions with sessions of walking, work or other mild activity to keep yourself alert during the day. If you have a time of day when you generally feel lethargic, add a session of walking, yoga, or a short nap to keep yourself refreshed.
- Even experienced practitioners usually need a break of some kind after 3 or more hours of practice.

# SETTING A SCHEDULE

- Make time for tea or other hydration and time for meals and snacks. And of course, schedule time for bathroom breaks and personal hygiene.
- You can add sessions of study, contemplation, physical practices and work, as well. You can do art, such as thangka painting, or other dharma activities, too, such as learning to make tormas and so on. But be sure these activities are scheduled, so you're creating a container of discipline and intention and not just responding to the whims of the wandering mind. (Nothing wrong with spontaneity, but we train for that all the time.)



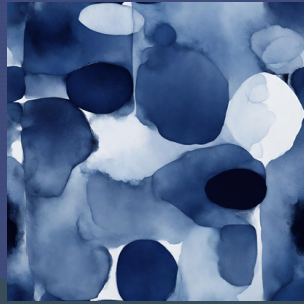
# SETTING DISCIPLINE

The discipline of schedules, silence and so on are often seen as a set of restrictions. Instead, see if you can think of them as supports for your practice. For example, not speaking allows you to more easily watch the mind, in stillness and in movement. When you stick to a schedule, you can set an alarm, or wait for the bell at a retreat center to be rung, and you can let go of the burden of minding the clock. It's tremendously freeing. When you do a daily chore assignment, or dress according to the standards of a retreat center, you have liberated the energy you'd otherwise be using to make those decisions.

Create a supportive retreat discipline through deciding in advance

- Schedule
- What media you will use or not use (books, paper and pen, mobile devices and so on)
- Dress for the retreat
- Food and drink
- Interactions with others – conversation, interactions, eye contact
- Activities you will and will not do on retreat (reading, working, exercise and so on).

Generally, rigorous physical exercise is not recommended on retreat. Lifting weights, sprinting and hard biking can be replaced for the duration of retreat with walking, yoga or other stretching, and more simple physical exertion that does not tend to stir the mind.



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