

Thoughts on Silence, Solitude, and Retreat

By Joseph Cadiff

“When one has abandoned environments at odds with practice, mental afflictions gradually wane. When one is without distraction, virtuous practice waxes on its own. As awareness naturally becomes clearer, certainty in dharma grows. Keeping to solitude is the bodhisattvas’ practice.”

-*The 37 Practices of Bodhisattvas* (vs. 3)

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

-Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

In our modern, western world there are certain types of retreat, and certain ideas of “retreat,” with which I think most people are familiar. We understand such things as writers’ retreats meant for personal reflection and solitary, focused composition. We understand the retreat to one’s cabin in the woods, or a place by the beach, or in the country, or a getaway to a campground in the mountains to replenish and renew one’s energy and clear one’s mind before returning to one’s work in the world. We also accept such things as corporate bonding retreats, or faculty retreats, and so on. We understand the value of taking time out to explore ourselves and one another outside our everyday context. And fundamentally, I think most of us understand that something healthy and restorative happens when we remove ourselves from the hustle and bustle of everyday life and allow for quiet, solitude, and time in nature. John Muir expressed this sentiment shared by generations of later outdoor enthusiasts:

“Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop away from you like the leaves of Autumn.”

Similarly, Franz Kafka wrote about solitude:

“You do not need to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen, simply wait, be quiet, still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked, it has no choice, it will roll in ecstasy at your feet.”

In America, we also have the heritage of the early solitary explorers of North America; we have the great wilderness adventurers, and nature writers. We have Emerson. We have Thoreau, who left us the literary gem of *Walden*, which extols the virtues of solitude, simplicity, and silent contemplation. We have Thomas Merton. And I think we still hold some faint cultural memory of the earlier Christian and Jewish contemplatives and the Greek contemplatives who knew well the powers and importance of silence and solitude. Overall, though, it seems these voices have fallen into the background as our lives have become increasingly more frenetic, stimulated, stressful, and fractured.

And yet, perhaps as a natural response to the craziness of our modern lives, here in 2020, we see a huge rise in the popularity of meditation, yoga, and wellness techniques of all kinds. And with it, we have seen the reemergence of the ideal of contemplative retreat, at least to some extent. We've come to accept the idea of an individual going away for a week, or ten days, to a retreat center, or even a monastery, to engage in reflection and some type of meditative program. It has even become cliché for someone to remove themselves from their Euro-American social context for a period of time and journey to "The East," whether India, Nepal, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Burma, or Thailand, to explore the spiritual traditions of these cultures. "Eat, Pray, Love" is now firmly within our cultural vocabulary.

But I think, overall, we still consider these "retreats" or "spiritual adventures" as a temporary respite from our normal lives. We hope for some insight, clarity, or boost of energy that we can take back into our lives. Or maybe we even hope to write a book about our experiences or start teaching meditation or yoga in an attempt to help others find something of the inspiration or healing we experienced. In essence, we hope that in a relatively short period of time we can crack the code of our existential dissatisfaction and suffering and return to the world to live as better, more enlightened people. And this, indeed, is admirable. And, certainly, it is an important first step on the spiritual path. But if we place such respites from normal life within the context of the solitary retreats and spiritual quests undergone by the spiritual masters of the past and present, like Shakyamuni Buddha, the Desert Fathers, St. Francis of Assisi, Shantideva, Milarepa, and others, we see that these respites are more like dipping our toes in the great ocean of spiritual wisdom. They may be exciting, inspiring, and even insightful, but they do not cut the root of suffering and bring us to the omniscience of complete enlightenment. To truly soak up all there is to realize on the spiritual path, and truly free ourselves from suffering and the ignorance that is its cause, we need to become deep-water swimmers.

Another important distinction to make is that the true contemplative retreat is not simply an escape or retreat from the "tough, but unavoidable" realities of so-called "real life." It is actually a way of plunging deeper into the very essence of life and what it is to be alive. It is a step towards discovering deeper truths about ourselves and our world. From this perspective, it is also not simply a turning away from our fellow human beings; in as much as it is a furthering of our

collective human understanding of reality, it is actually an invaluable service to any society. As Peter France writes of the Desert Fathers in his book *Hermits*:

“For the Desert Fathers, solitude was not merely an escape from distractions; it was a teaching presence. To remain silent and alone is to be open to influences that are crowded out of an occupied life. These influences, some felt, were enough to bring about spiritual health. We may well have a duty to our fellow human beings, and good works are praiseworthy; but self-knowledge can only come through solitude.”

Further, a true contemplative retreat is also not an escape or momentary retreat from an unhealthy and overstressed way of life. The true contemplative – the true spiritual aspirant – sees that taking up an actual spiritual path is not a matter of going into the spiritual shop for a tune-up so we can get back out on the highway of an unhealthy, disconnected, and unexamined life; it is about fundamentally reexamining our worldview, our habits, and our way of life altogether. True spirituality is not a hangover tonic; it is realizing that cocktail parties were a dead-end all along.

Therefore, though our spiritual exploration may begin with one of these weekend respites that give us a taste of a new way of being in the world, eventually, if we are serious about pursuing a spiritual path that actually cuts the root of ignorance, delusion, dissatisfaction, and suffering, the orientation with which we explore spiritual practice and retreat must radically shift. For the true contemplative, or yogin, spiritual retreat is a dramatic turning away from old, deluded ways of being, and a wholehearted taking up of *specific* spiritual practices that previous masters have used to cultivate their hearts and minds, purify their view of reality, and attain liberation and awakening. In other words, spiritual practice aimed at true liberation and awakening is not merely a “spiritual” ornament to an already comfortable or calcified life; it is a profound act of renunciation and defiance, and also of radical hope. It is an act of hope that takes as its object the possibility of complete liberation from suffering and omniscient enlightenment for each and every sentient being. And at least in the Buddhist tradition (with which I am most familiar), the means employed to accomplish this lofty goal are far from aimless and scattered forms of pathless solitary reflection or mental wandering. They are specific, precise, and tried and tested methods practiced and accomplished by thousands of spiritual masters over more than two thousand years. But as long as we try to fit these profound practices into our ordinary life without fundamentally reexamining our assumptions, our worldview, our habits, and way of life, we will never reap the fruits enjoyed by the accomplished masters of past and present.

And yet, in a sense, even a more serious contemplative retreat (at least in the Mahayana Buddhist context) still follows something of the same trajectory of a short-term spiritual experience that one uses as inspiration to then live as a better human being in the world who is more capable of helping others. That is, according to Mahayana Buddhism, one pursues the path of enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, with the idea being that in order to be of greatest benefit to

others, one must attain the complete spiritual awakening of a Buddha. This is not to say that one does not work to help and serve others along the way, but simply that one understands all along that one will be of greatest benefit when one has reached the spiritual maturation of a Buddha. But considering that most people do not believe that such spiritual awakening is even possible, it is not surprising that few people actually pursue measures to achieve this level of spiritual maturation. Nonetheless, we can say that, in a sense, the bodhisattva path to Buddhahood within the Buddhist context, is essentially the same as the short-term spiritual replenishment experienced by so many, just on a far larger and deeper scale.

One way of thinking of it would be to compare someone who goes to the gym for a week and then returns home to help Grandma move heavy furniture and someone who trains with the world's top weightlifters for five years and then wins a gold medal at the Olympics. Both of these individuals got stronger and were able to then apply their strength to some endeavor in the world; but with a higher, and more long-term goal in mind, rather than simply helping grandma move furniture for a few days before getting out of shape again, the second person becomes a gold-medal Olympian, and develops a lifelong habit for staying in shape.

But again, to emphasize, in the spiritual case what is primary is the actual spiritual realization attained by the practitioner, not necessarily the outward acts they engage in after they have completed their practice – or at least progressed quite deeply in their practice. This, of course, is entirely antithetical to the outward-looking, materialist attitude of our modern western culture. Nonetheless, many great sages, even those of the Mahayana disposition who pursue enlightenment for others' sake, remain quite ordinary in their outward display, often not engaging in acts that would inspire a Nobel Peace Prize. And yet, I believe these beings are benefiting our world in ways we cannot fully understand. On the other hand, some great spiritual beings do engage in acts that we would customarily associate with saintliness, such as His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. The point is: the authentic practitioner does not practice for the sake of outward displays or acclaim.

Now, with those distinctions and caveats in mind, let's look at the specifics of what is done in retreat, and explore the question of why it might take years to accomplish the essential practices. Interestingly, while the essential practices of the Buddhist path to enlightenment are not necessarily easy, or swiftly accomplished, I believe understanding their trajectory and the framework that holds them together is relatively straightforward. Of course, simply understanding the framework and progression of practices will not liberate us, but it should give us some insight into why one might retreat into solitude and simplicity to devote oneself single-pointedly to practice. It will also shed light on why one might do so for many years, or even decades. Indeed, many of the Tibetan spiritual masters of the 20th century, including Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Kalu Rinpoche, and one of my own lamas, Lama Karma, spent over ten years in solitary retreat.

So, in Buddhism, after one has already decided, “I’m done living in the cycle of ignorance, delusion, and suffering – I’m done living in *samsara* (not a place, but a way of being); I now want to try something new for once in countless lifetimes: I want to pursue the path to enlightenment for the benefit of all beings,” one then engages in the three “higher trainings” of Buddhism. That is, after one has (1) successively cultivated renunciation and revulsion towards the deluded ways of *samsara* and cultivated the spirit of emergence that yearns for enlightenment, and (2) realized that the true refuge from *samsara* is the practice of authentic dharma, and (3) then given rise to the Spirit of Awakening, or Bodhicitta (the pledge to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings), one then takes up the three “higher trainings” of ethical discipline (*shila*), meditative concentration (*samadhi*), and penetrating wisdom (*prajna*).

With this progression in mind, we see that when one makes the decision to leave behind worldly concerns and pursuits to enter retreat, one is not simply “retreating,” but rather breaking free of distractions in order to fully *devote* oneself, with all of one’s being, to the essential *training* of the Buddhist path to enlightenment. And let us remember that far from a general experience of feeling more spiritually awake or alive, enlightenment in the Buddhist context means completely removing the veils of ignorance and delusion that cloud our perception of reality such that we perceive reality just as it is, and come to dwell in the simultaneous and permanent recognition of both its relative and absolute nature. For, according to Buddhism, it is our ignorance and our delusion with respect to the true nature of things that leads to our perpetual dissatisfaction and suffering. We don’t see things as they are and then we get it totally wrong and so we suffer again and again. These three essential trainings of Buddhism are designed specifically to uproot this fundamental and learned ignorance that is the cause of our personal suffering, and of all the suffering we see in the world.

So how does this process work?

Well, the first step after renunciation, refuge, and bodhicitta, is to adopt an ethical and conscientious way of life that is defined, in essence, by non-violence and benevolence. That is, we do our best to refrain from harming all sentient beings and all possible ways; and we do our best to cultivate love and compassion for all sentient beings and work for their benefit in all possible ways, understanding that the ultimate way of benefiting beings is to sincerely pursue and attain complete spiritual awakening for oneself and others.

Cultivating this wholesome, ethical way of life can actually bring about its own sort of liberation, as it frees us from the worry of looking over our shoulder, or constantly feeling like we’re covering our tracks or avoiding getting caught, or found out, or that someone we’ve wronged might retaliate. Indeed, when we purify our minds and our lives through ethical discipline, we experience a deep peace of mind and wellbeing. As the great Christian contemplative, Julian of

Norwich, said, “A soul at peace with itself is at once united with God.” And a person that is not living an impeccable ethical life will never find such inner peace. Whereas when we get right with ourselves and those around us, and we look within and see that our own hearts and minds and are pure, and that our driving intentions are genuinely altruistic, we are at peace with ourselves and our world. This is a profound and sacred peace, and an essential foundation to the spiritual path. On the Buddhist path, however, it is not the end. It is only the ground upon which one can actually pursue the next two trainings of *samadhi* and *prajna*, meditative concentration and penetrating insight into the nature of reality. For in order to attain the higher levels of meditative concentration that make penetrating insight into the nature of reality possible, one must possess a mind that is renounced from worldly concerns, confident in the path of dharma, firmly intent on awakening, and at peace with itself through the cultivation of ethical discipline.

This progression from ethics to higher levels of spiritual realization is expressed in the following verses from *The 37 Practices of Bodhisattvas*:

The Buddha taught that the miseries of lower states of existence,
Which are incredibly hard to bear, are the fruit of wrongdoing.
Therefore, never committing non-virtue, even at the cost of life,
is the bodhisattvas’ practice. (vs. 8)

Like a dewdrop on a blade of grass, wellbeing in the
Three unenlightened realms of existence perish in but an instant.
Seeking the supreme release of never-changing liberation
Is the bodhisattvas’ practice. (vs.9)

Mental afflictions are completely overcome by the
Union of *shamatha* and *vipashyana* (*samadhi* and *prajna*).
Knowing this, to cultivate such meditative concentration
That has transcended the four formless absorptions
Is the bodhisattvas’ practice. (vs. 29)

Shantideva also said in *A Guide to The Bodhisattvas’ Way of Life*:

Penetrative insight (*vipashyana*) joined with calm abiding (*shamatha*)
Utterly eradicates mental afflictions.
Knowing this, first seek calm abiding,
Found only by those happy to live free from worldly concerns. (vs. 8.4)

Unlike ethics and other virtues of the spiritual path, however, profound levels meditative concentration usually cannot be cultivated amidst the business of ordinary life. And it is

primarily for this reason that one retreats into solitude and simplicity to engage in this second training. Of course, one may – and many do – begin this practice amidst a more active way of life, but in order to bring one’s meditative concentration to its fullest potential, and most importantly, to the levels necessary to stabilize the sharp insight of *prajna*, the non-distraction and continuity of practice made possible in solitude is essential. Many of the authoritative Buddhist texts also mention the benefits of practicing somewhere safe, with like-minded companions, a qualified teacher, and where basic provisions are not too difficult to come by.

Shantideva tells us in *A Guide to the Bodhisattvas’ Way of Life*:

In solitude, the mind and body
Are not troubled by distraction
Therefore, leave this worldly life
And totally abandon mental wandering. (vs. 8.2)

And Patrul Rinpoche said in *Words of My Perfect Teacher*:

All the siddhas of the past attained spiritual accomplishment only by practicing with determination, willingly accepting all hardships, having cast aside every worldly activity. No one of them attained realization by practicing alongside the usual activities of everyday life, enjoying comfort, wellbeing and fame. (pp. 243)

Patrul Rinpoche also said in the same work:

As the saying goes: “In places where you feel lonely, meditative concentration arises.” There, all the good qualities of the path – disenchantment with samsara, determination to free oneself from it, faith, purity of perception, concentration and absorption – arise naturally. Do whatever you can to live like that. (pp.250)

Now to speak a bit more about the importance of attaining proper *samadhi*, the Buddhist and many other of the yogic traditions of ancient India discovered that in order to really gain penetrating and lasting insights into the nature of reality capable of liberating one from suffering permanently, one must have an incredibly high level of single-pointed, meditative concentration (far beyond ordinary levels “extreme concentration” that we might think of in athletes or musicians). The need for this profound level of mental balance and concentration stems from a much more accessible insight into the nature of mind: a mind without extensive meditative training is constantly oscillating between excitation and dullness, and it is incredibly difficult to keep it focused on any object for very long, let alone an objects as subtle as the mind and consciousness.

If you don't believe these yogis of old, try sitting down somewhere and counting your breaths up to ten without becoming distracted and see how you do. Then try sitting down and sustaining a direct perception of ultimate reality for a few minutes. If your mind is like most minds, these experiments might soon convince you of the need for *samadhi* if your intention is to actually dwell in the nature of ultimate reality and thereby attain liberation from suffering. Indeed, even if you hang out in solitude for a while, but never accomplish *samadhi* (*shamatha*), you might come up with some interesting insights about yourself and the world, but you will not have the high powered telescope of the mind necessary for perceiving and eventually dwelling in the true nature of reality. One of my teachers, B. Alan Wallace, compares this type of samadhi-less contemplative practice to the idea of trying to practice astronomy using the naked eye or with a kid's telescope. This would be considered "folk" astronomy by professional astronomers, and likewise serious spiritual practice without meditative concentration could be considered "folk" or amateur spirituality. There's thing wrong with it, and it might even be enjoyable, but you're not going to discover the moons of Jupiter.

It is for this reason that the great masters so strongly emphasized attaining *shamatha* as a sound basis for sustainable insights into the deepest levels of reality. It is also why it is the practice of *shamatha* that is the primary focus of the work being done at the Center for Contemplative Research. In both cases, it is understood that without this incredibly subtle refinement of the mind, we are left with both amateur spirituality and amateur exploration of the nature of mind, and the origins and potentials of consciousness. For after all consider our habitual state of mind with that of *shamatha* as described by Padmasambhava in *Natural Liberation*:

Flawless quiescence (*shamatha*) is like an oil lamp that is unmoved by the wind. Wherever awareness is placed, it is unwaveringly present; awareness is vividly clear, without being sullied by laxity, lethargy, or dimness; where the awareness is directed, it is steady and sharply pointed; unmoved by adventitious thoughts, it is straight. (pp.113)

After describing the characteristics of *shamatha*, Padmasambhava goes on to explain its critical importance:

Without genuine quiescence arising in one's mind-stream, even if *rigpa* (primordial awareness) is pointed out you, it becomes nothing more than an object of intellectual understanding; one is left simply giving lip-service to the view, and there is the danger that you may succumb to dogmatism. Thus, the root of all meditative states depends on this. (pp. 113)

The great master Atisha also spoke of the benefits and importance of *shamatha* in his *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*:

“Just as a bird with undeveloped wings
Cannot fly in the sky,

Those without the power of extrasensory perception
Cannot work for the good of living being. (vs. 35)

The merit gained in a single day
By someone with extrasensory perception
Cannot be gained even in a hundred lifetimes
By one without extrasensory perception. (vs. 36)

Without the achievement of *shamatha*,
Extrasensory perception will not arise.
Therefore, make repeated effort
To accomplish *shamatha*. (vs. 38)

As long as the conditions for *shamatha* are incomplete,
Samadhi will not be accomplished
Even if you meditate diligently
For a thousand years. (vs. 39)

When a contemplative has achieved *shamatha*
Extrasensory perception will also be realized.
But if one does not cultivate the Perfection of Wisdom,
One's obscurations will not come to an end." (vs. 41)

For those of us who have attended a meditation retreat, or a teaching given by a spiritual master, or even read a profound book on spiritual practice, we may be familiar with the experience of gaining some apparently profound, and possibly even life-changing insight into the nature of reality, only to later feel it slipping away and becoming nothing more than an exciting memory of a spiritual experience we once had. And it still might have some bearing on our life, but it does not live with us in the present as fully embodied, and sustained experience. This is because that insight into reality was not held by the mental stability of *samadhi/shamatha*.

As the great Dzogchen master, Dudjom Rinpoche, wrote in *Heart Jewel of the Fortunate*:

The mere recognition of awareness will not liberate you. Throughout your lives from beginningless time, you have been enveloped in false beliefs and deluded habits. From then till now you have spent every moment as a miserable, pathetic slave of your thoughts! And when you die, it's not at all certain where you will go. You will follow your karma, and you will have to suffer. This is the reason why you must meditate, continuously preserving the state of awareness you have been introduced to. The omniscient Longchenpa has said, "You may recognize your own nature, but if you do not meditate and get used to it, you will be like a baby on the battlefield: you'll be carried off by the enemy, the hostile army of your own thoughts!"

And isn't this exactly what happens? We catch a glimpse of some spiritual truth and then slowly the scattered movements of our habitual thoughts begin to erode that realization into a stale memory, and we are left giving lip-service to a view of reality that we have not actualized for ourselves. And so, as Dudjom Rinpoche puts it succinctly, "If you do not meditate, you will not gain certainty [in the nature of mind]; if you do, you will."

One potent analogy to describe this relationship between single-pointed meditative concentration and insight into the true nature of reality (i.e. cutting the root of ignorance and delusion) is that of a strong arm, and axe, and a tree. In this analogy, the tree is the tree of deeply habituated ignorance and delusion that we need to chop down, the sharp axe is the blade of wisdom with which we must cut the tree, and the strong arm is the meditative stability of *shamatha* that keeps the axe of wisdom steady, such that it can continually strike the tree with sustained force in the exact same place. That is, if we have a weak arm and a sharp blade, then we will simply be flailing at the tree, striking it with varied levels of force, and in countless different places, making it impossible to ever actually chop the tree down. Whereas if you have a strong arm and a sharp axe, you can strike the tree again and again in the same place and the groove in the tree will go deeper and deeper until ultimately the tree falls over.

In the same way, we must cultivate the strong arm of meditative stabilization such that we can continually, and sustainably strike at the root of ignorance and delusion until the veil is removed forever and reality is seen as it is. As the Great Siddha Tilopa said in his *Ganga Mahamudra*, "cut the root of the tree and the branches will wither up."

So, as I said, I think the progression of these practices is somewhat simple to understand. We have the initial renunciation and the aspiration to attain enlightenment, which then sets us on the path of engaging in the three higher trainings of Buddhism (ethics, samadhi, and wisdom). Ethics give us the foundational peace of mind and the conducive outer conditions within which to practice; and we then engage in the higher trainings of fully cultivating *samadhi* and *wisdom*. But it is important to understand that, especially in the modern world, the process of settling our bodies and minds into the meditative state of samadhi can take quite a bit of time. It's like a murky glass of water needing to sit for a while before the dirt settles to the bottom of the glass. And think about how much dirt we have whirling around in our glasses in the modern world. So while it is impossible to perfectly predict how long this settling process will take for any given individual, most masters say that six months to eighteen months are a good place to start. Some may settle more quickly, and others may take longer. But now that we understand the stakes at which we are playing when we enter these three higher trainings, it should not really matter how long it takes. That is, if it is the key to liberating ourselves from beginningless suffering and delusion, what really is a few years? Moreover, if we take into account all our countless lives circling in *samsara*, even ten or twenty years is a mere blip on the screen. So couldn't we *at least* give ourselves the gift of a few years of single-pointed dedication to these profound practices in

the noble effort to understand our existence and free ourselves and other from suffering?
Anyway, I think so.

And so, this is, in a nutshell, why one would might engage in solitary retreat within the spiritual, and specifically, Buddhist context. And the progression of practices I have described above is the purpose behind the solitary retreat program at Center for Contemplative Research, *Miyo Samten Ling*. Indeed, this name of *Miyo Samten Ling*, given by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, means: “Hermitage of Unwavering Samadhi.”

Finally, if you would like to know more about how this cultivation of ethics, samadhi, and wisdom is related to forwarding the insights of modern science into the nature of mind, consciousness, and reality, I encourage you to check out the Contemplative Science page on this website and read the essay I've written on The Argument for Contemplative Science.

A Simple Prayer

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.
Where there is injury, let me sow pardon.
Where there is doubt, let me sow faith.
Where there is despair, let me sow hope.
Where there is darkness, let me sow light.
Where there is sadness, let me sow joy.

O Divine Master,
Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console,
To be understood as to understand,
To be loved as to love.

Lord it is in giving that we receive.
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.
And it is in dying to self that we are born to eternal life.

-St. Francis