

Retreat Preparation for Master's Students. Nov. 2013 by Paula Chichester

Creating Causes and Conditions for Successful Retreat

Staying in a retreat for a year or more may require the ability to withstand hardship. Hardship is a big part of transforming the ordinary mind; it is the fire that forges realizations of renunciation, bodhicitta and emptiness. We don't get the opportunity to practice thought transformation without experiencing hardship. It truly is a blessing. However, attention to comfort is also important, (don't get extreme, seek remedies when you can), because if we are not content, at least some of the time, we won't be able to sustain the retreat. If we stay in retreat just through sheer will power or peer pressure, the likelihood of wishing to do a retreat again may be slim. So, the main thing is to balance hardship with whatever you need to do to keep your mind reasonably content if your attempts at thought training just aren't working for you.

Therefore, meditating on the lam rim, generating the whole picture in your mind, is of utmost importance, particularly guru yoga. Doing Lama Chopa every morning or evening, taking the four empowerments, resting in whatever mahamudra you have and then reflecting on meaning of the lam rim prayer is essential. If your lineage is different, then do the corresponding guru yoga, resting in the nature of mind, lam rim. Bodhicitta meditation is indispensable. Cultivating self-love and acting with that as part of your bodhicitta motivation all day is also essential. When we are alone, there is no one else to do that for us and humans thrive on love. We can't deny our human hormonal inner landscapes.

So whatever hang-ups you have about loving yourself, your first job is to get over that. Otherwise you can fall into the danger of labeling actions motivated by self-denial or self-hatred, renunciation. Be kind to yourself while learning to transform difficulties. For some people, the best way to learn to love yourself is to remember how much the guru loves you. The meditation on remembering the kindness of the Guru, all the teachings, all the love you feel from the guru, remember that. When you keep that love in the form of the guru at your heart, you can fill your being with love, then give that to you and then to all others, even the enemy.

This is an ongoing process, you may have to catch yourself pushing too hard often, being too strict. We can be too strict with the schedule and/or too strict with the inner workings in the sessions. Don't be concerned with results; be concerned with the process. Ambition is good, necessary for this path, but unbalanced ambition is still an imbalance in the retreat process. So, we need to get to know our minds and bodies. Each day is slightly different, so the intensity with

which we approach the work we are doing with our minds, -- the intensity of concentration -- has to be evaluated each day. For me, less is usually preferred to prevent lung.

Growing realizations is like growing seeds into seedlings into young plants in a green house. Not only do we need to know the science of how to care for the body and mind, nourish it with food and psychological care, we need love. The best gardeners work from a place of affection for what they are growing. Self-cherishing or self-preoccupation is the main obstacle and we can't tie it up or put it in a closet to make it go away. It is like a child, it needs to be listened to, but not allowed to have its way, we have to guide it lovingly on to the correct path. Pay attention to the tone of the inner voice that speaks to you. Remember the example of the Horse Whisperer or the Dog Whisperer. They get the best results with training a wild animal with love, not force. Love is power.

Of course, there are those people who are extreme in the other direction, they just want to lie around all day and pretend to practice, or do short sessions and spend the rest of the time watching movies on their computers. But I don't reckon that folks like that have the determination to complete a four-year Master's Program.

I will guide you through a meditation that is not analytical but experiential on how to touch base with feelings, open into an experience of non-referential love and compassion and this is the best tool I have found to work with our obstacle: self-cherishing mind. The objective is simply to watch, let come up what will, and let it go with a mind of loving kindness. We can also listen to the voice of fear, anxiety, ambition, hatred, desire, etc. with empathy and compassion. Sometimes the story has to be heard, other times, just drop the story and let the energy flow where it needs to go, and then meditate on emptiness.

Exhaustion is another factor. Forget about how much you think you need to sleep. Just sleep as much as you need to feel bright enough to concentrate. Gen Lam Rimpa told us that yogis sleep as much as they need to. The first month should be focused mainly on resting, getting familiar with our new surroundings and adjusting to being alone. If being alone is too difficult, then go speak to someone you have included in your retreat. Squeezing never works.

It is also important to taper off the retreat the last month. Start to talk to people. And when you leave, go to a place where you can be quiet and enter into the busy world at a relaxed pace. Don't try to drive yourself down the freeway.

OUTER CONDITIONS:

If possible, stay in place that supports your mental and physical health. If the conditions aren't perfect, that is okay. You can spend years looking for the right place and never get into retreat. People do this. So take what you can, within reason. A year isn't that long.

Clean dwelling; if possible, live in a shelter that is non-toxic, easy to clean and maintain, that is rodent proof. If not, see if you can fill in holes where rodents come in. Check the feng-sui; adjust it where possible to fit your pakua number. See Lillian Too's books on feng sui – recommended by Kyabje Zopa Rinpoche

Clean Air, (non-toxic air inside the retreat house is very important, look out for toxic cleaning agents, propane gas, mold, toxic building materials, toxic washing detergent, furnishings and rugs with toxic materials; healthful incense- even check your clothing and bedding.)

I strongly suggest that you leave your laptops out of the retreat. If you have recorded teachings, then an Ipod would work. You can print out texts that are on your laptops. Laptops and Ipads have too many ways to stay distracted, but mostly their electronic fields will interfere with your concentration. You can keep a handwritten journal, it keeps the writing pace organic and in sync with your natural mental rhythm. Lama Yeshe told us many times that the process of transforming the mind is organic, like growing a flower.

Clean water; get a filter if you need one.

The person who shops for you and takes care of your business, preferably, has taken refuge, understands or at least supports what you are doing, is happy to support you (they realize the value to themselves for supporting you– best if you have the same guru – best if they maintain their samaya purely.

Sponsors: It is very beneficial if you have sponsors. They create merit and the cause for doing retreat themselves. Knowing that you are doing it for others who are directly sponsoring you, depending on you, helps you to maintain joyous effort and determination if hardships develop.

These conditions are relative to the degree of guru devotion and ability to bear hardship that you have. It is important to be honest with yourself and really check up what level of comfort you need to keep your mind happy.. The greater the motivation, the less attention to comfort is needed. Lama Zopa Rinpoche has said that anyone can say many mantras (or review lam rim); it

is the degree to which we bear hardship that marks the quality of a meditator. Transforming hardship is the key to opening the mind to realization. Strange as this may sound, it is true. Hardship helps us to develop all the stages of the path. When we are comfortable and happy, no need to hone lam rim realizations.

However, we are not in the business of inflicting self-abuse; that is why we must be honest about what we need and be able to adjust our conditions if we discover we need more comfort. This also applies to the amount of solitude we can bear. Letting go of internet and mobile phones can be a difficult transition for some people; but it is very important to let this go for the duration of the retreat. Not just for our mental leisure and peace, but also because electromagnetic fields interfere with our ability to concentrate.

So, set up proper boundaries: where you will allow yourself to go, with whom you can speak or write letters. Do not have email or advertise your retreat on the internet. It can only bring obstacles. It is good to include a few blanks in case you meet someone or have to go to a dentist or something like that.

Eat healthy food. If you can wean yourself off of white sugar, this can be very helpful. Sugar not only causes craving and dissatisfaction, but it also makes ones nervous system feel pain more strongly, so painful backs, knees are greatly exacerbated when you eat white sugar. Sugar also lowers your immune system. Honey, fruit, agave does not have this negative impact on the body. Discover what foods work best for your meditation practice. It is easy to tell in retreat because there are very few variables affecting your experience besides what you eat and how long you sleep and how intense you concentrate. Be like a scientist, always investigating your inner and outer landscape, what is conducive and what is not.

If you have trouble with fatigue or joint pains, find out if you have any food allergies. You can do that by abstaining from a particular food (e.g. wheat, sugar, corn, corn syrup, soy, different nuts, yeast, gluten) for two weeks. Then eat a lot of it three times a day and see how you feel. Just do one at a time. Read labels on processed foods. Best to eat whole foods.

Drink plenty of water. Fatigue is often simply a result of dehydration.

INNER CONDITIONS:

GURU DEVOTION Guru Devotion—Every day remember the kindness of the Guru. Take time to do a good session of the guru entering the heart, every session if you can, when you can. After

the guru enters the heart and the heart fills with love, then, penetrate the whole experience with emptiness. Just “let go”.

MAINTAIN PURE SAMAYA

MOTIVATION! Bodhicitta motivation will keep you in retreat. Work on it all the time, not just in words, but with analysis and deep feelings. Retreat can be too difficult to sustain for oneself alone or for worldly concern.

Cultivate an awareness of your inner landscape. Is it in sunset mode, sunrise, windy? You may have to adjust your meditation each day or each session to suit what is going on. If you just squeeze through your agenda, this is a sure recipe for wind disturbance (lung). Take 15 minutes or more at the beginning of each session to watch the breath, become aware of your posture, come home to a sense of well being and relaxation. For me, this is best accomplished with beginning with a guru yoga practice, then allowing those blessings to settle my mind. But this may not be your case. Be creative and discover what works for your mind.

Renunciation: Reflect on the lower scope lam rim meditations every morning. The Innermost Jewels of the Kadampa Geshe is the retreaters’ treasure. Renunciation is based on self-love. The idea that I will definitely emerge from samsara can only come from a self-view based on cherishing oneself. We can’t cherish others until we cherish ourselves in a healthy, not over or under-exaggerated view. I don’t think this is such an issue for Tibetans, so it is not stressed in their teaching.

When we are alone and purifying, psychological issues will come up. Retreat is also a time for healing. The false self does not go to enlightenment. We have to uncover our genuine or authentic relative selves before that can be successfully transformed into the mind of a bodhisattva. Otherwise, unconscious impulses will constantly sabotage our attempts at virtuous behavior. Attention and concentration can also be hampered by unaddressed psychological issues. It may not come up for you, but it is good to be prepared for the event if it does. Retreat is the best place to make a lot of progress.

For us of the Judeo-Christian culture, we need to identify our inner sense of self-loathing, a feeling of general all purpose lack of self-appreciation (or over aggrandizing the self based on this inner lack) that most of us have learned to deny with our conscious mind. It is like a needy hole in the soul that compels us to fill it with constant entertainment and distraction with outer

enjoyments such as social relationships, beneficial work in the world, food, shopping, internet, etc...

The remedy is to find that tender needy spot inside and sit with it. Recognize the wall we built around it to anesthetize ourselves to feeling it and slowly tear down that wall. Taking time every day just to sit and be with the breath, go through the physical body and let experiences re-surface. Heal your wounds with ton len for yourself, forgiveness for others by recognizing their pain and generally allowing yourself to sit with the all-encompassing experience of care, empathy, love, compassion, gratefulness.

By feeling genuine compassion for victim and perpetrator, whether self or other; by applying the four opponent powers; by engaging in the meditations on karma, compassion, empathy, emptiness, gratefulness, guru devotion, etc.; we diffuse that whole victim/perpetrator paradigm that makes us uncomfortable with being alone with ourselves. Once we learn to cherish every aspect of ourselves, from an authentic sense of self, then we can recognize self-cherishing and find the object to be refuted. We can stand totally alone in our own validation and gratitude and joy for who we are, so we no longer look outside of ourselves for a sense of self-worth. The inner guru is born. We become emotionally self-sufficient, self-empowered. We can find joy that is not based on attachment. Then, we can stay in retreat.

Emptiness.

While working with renunciation and bodhicitta, we also begin to look at the mind. In our sitting quietly watching the breath exercises, after we have opened our body to awareness, take some time to look at the mind. Just look. Begin to investigate the refuting object, what really is clarity or luminosity, what is mind looking at mind, what is awareness. Identify these things that you read about with what is actual experience and don't worry so much about getting it right, right away, just look. Use the mind to investigate the mind, with and without thoughts. By settling into the body and keeping part of the awareness in the body, keep the mind relaxed. Stop before you are tired.

Don't expect every session to be a "good" session. Just show up every session and do the best you can and then don't judge so much. Be aware, of course, but suspend the labels of good and bad. It is what it is, that is all. Some days you can concentrate, other days you can't, but don't fret about it. Just make sure you rest enough.

Gen Lam Rimpa told us that yogis on long retreats get as much sleep as they need. In the beginning you may need to sleep a lot. Just go with what your body can do, if you do that, you may need less sleep as the retreat progresses. If you constantly push beyond your physical capabilities, you will be unhappy in a few months. The people who left Shinay Land after a year or so, left behind piles of caffeine and sugar behind. This is not the way to sustain a retreat. Remember the teaching of the guitar string, not too loose and not too tight is the way to meditate.

Re-creation is really important. There must be something that you love to do, that feeds you. Something creative that is conducive to your meditation experience. Journals can be very helpful. Find a creative outlet when a walk or reading a dharma book isn't enough to keep you inspired.

SECRET – Keep your winds flowing. Very important.

A daily practice of yoga or chi gong or kum nye is very helpful. I am best in retreat when I do four sessions of exercise every day... Prostrations, chi gong in the mornings, a walk in the afternoon and yoga in the evening. Feldenkrais movement (ATM's) is very helpful. Find the technique that works best for you and do it regularly! If you know Reiki, doing Reiki on yourself is highly recommended. Self-massage is good also. Ma Rollers are helpful for back tension.

If you can connect with a Chinese doctor or a homeopath or a naturopath or an ayurvedic doctor before you go into retreat, this would be very helpful. See if there is a way you can communicate with them inside the retreat if possible. Experiment and find the diet that keeps your mind balanced and your body strong. One of these types of doctors can help you with that. Find ways to help yourself to stay balanced in retreat.

If you have deep issues with your parents or other issues of psychological concern, consult with a therapist before going on a long retreat. These issues can come up very strong in retreat. At least know methods to help you work with these issues.

SUCHNESS – As much as you can, remember presence and awareness of the empty state of you. Subject and object. In break times, maintain awareness of the ground from which the thoughts arise, and that this ground is empty. That awareness that is paying attention is also empty. Lama Yeshe used to say “Let go” when Lama let meditations. Let go into relaxation and release the boundaries around self and other.

Ribur Rinpoche told us that we have a big goal but it is a long, long road and we must approach it in a very relaxed way. This is our greatest obstacle really, we don't know how to relax. Relaxation is meditation and emptiness arises out of a deeply relaxed mind. The mind can only relax when it is free of anxiety, which is ubiquitous in modern minds. Electromagnetic fields from the computers and cell phones cause anxiety. That is how they are so addicting; when we are plugged in, it seems to go away. That is why the cultivation of the experience of non-referential love is a key meditation. Relaxation arises in a state of love. I write this from the experience of solitary four year retreats. A year is not that long. So, maybe this information is more than you need. But just in case, I thought to share it, because it could help for even a year.

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