

Living Yoga

Sarah Powers in Yoga Journal, April 2002

Answering the Call

FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, retreat has been a crucial part of yogic life. All over Asia, whether in mountain caves or lush forests, seekers striving to free their minds recognized the importance of renouncing the worldly life, temporarily or permanently, in order to concentrate more fully on meditative practices.

Although there are still lone ascetics and communities of monastics, today most practitioners of yoga and Buddhism choose to remain in the world. As lay practitioners, we are blending the insights and openings we garner from these paths with the numerous responsibilities of a life that includes business and family. We live in a fast-paced digital era, but there is still no better way for devoted practitioners to encourage spiritual unfolding than to relinquish busy schedules and practical concerns and go on retreat. Whether we go for four days or three months, these periods of uninterrupted practice and quiet reflection allow us to melt away the distraction of compulsive busyness.

On retreat, we give ourselves (and everyone else) the gift of stripping away the mind's obsessions and revealing what Buddhist sages call our undistracted and compassionate Buddha nature.

In both the Hindu and the Buddhist spiritual traditions, 99 percent of practitioners have a need for retreats. A gifted few, with an abundance of spiritual karma from past lives, realize enlightenment with a minimum of practice and exposure to the teachings. But most wise teachers do not recommend simply wishing and waiting for this; instead, they advise seekers to repeatedly go on retreat to strengthen their understanding and to rest in the spaciousness of uninterrupted practice. The last teaching the great yogi Milarepa gave his chief disciple was to turn and show his student his behind, deeply callused from long years of sitting on the granite of the Himalayas. Milarepa's wordless message: You have to practice.

Embracing Silence

When I am about to leave on retreat, inevitably someone says, "Have a good time!" This comment amuses me, for I know that their idea of a good time is mostly not what I will be having. When I simply want to let my mind roam and body relax, I go to a warm sea with my family and friends. But I have gone on enough fun vacations to lose the illusion that feeling content has very much to do with what is going on outside me. When I really want to face and disempower the habits of discontent that continually resurface no matter where I am, I go on retreat. While it is not always easy or fun, I have found that going on meditation retreats and facing myself in silence allows me to see my fears and attachments more clearly, to embrace them with compassion, and to grow in intuition and trust of my true nature.

Going on retreat gives us the opportunity to pay attention to three essential aspects of spiritual practice. First, we learn or revisit the tools of awareness taught within a particular tradition. These are the specifics of asana, pranayama, and meditation appropriate for our level of understanding and application. On retreat, we also have the opportunity to hear the philosophical teachings that underlie these practices. In a traditional class or workshop, there just is not the time to delve into these areas very fully. Second, retreats give us an opportunity to reflect on these ideas and practices. This contemplation often sparks an uncompromising and unsentimental yet more truly compassionate view of ourselves and our lives, which is often a necessary precursor to change. Third, retreats strengthen practice. On retreat, in the absence of the tasks and distractions of our everyday lives, we are encouraged not only to practice more, accelerating our understanding and unfolding, but also to sustain the lens of mindfulness throughout each day.

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Once we've spent time on retreat, living with awareness day after day, we are more likely to catch ourselves and interrupt the habits of distraction when we return home. Instead of feeling irritated and restless when we get stuck waiting in a long line, for example, we may find it easier to turn inward with meditative awareness, appreciating the unhurried moments. By going on retreat, we get to practice living in a way that engenders clarity and compassion, the inner abodes of the awakened.

Unveiling Wisdom

RETREATS OFFER a theater in which our lives become the backdrop and our misidentification with the ego-self takes center stage. Sages have long spoken about an unchanging internal substratum of being, the true Self that is naturally full of bliss and love. They remind us that freedom is an inner alignment that neither comes into being nor dies, but is simply evoked by our quiet, undistracted, sustained surrender to its inner stream. But from childhood on we have learned to identify with other, less essential aspects of the self. We have been taught to find our sense of worthiness through our actions and the praise or blame heaped upon us by parents, teachers, friends, and mates. We have been trained to acquire knowledge about things but not about our innermost nature. If we are just quiet and still, a barrage of voices questions this strange behavior that does nothing to prove our worth.

So how are we to allow our inner wisdom to become unveiled? When we commit to an awareness discipline that places strong emphasis on watching the mind, like yoga and Buddhist practices, we take a first step. We go to teachers and learn new tools for working with our body, breath, heart, and mind. As time goes by, we practice and continue to receive teachings. Yet eventually we may feel a calling to go deeper, to put aside our practical and personal affairs for a time, to really dive in and see who we are apart from what we do -not just what we do for a living, but what we do as mothers, husbands, friends, and yoga practitioners.

Retreats allow us to see how illusory and impermanent such identities are, how we make and remake ourselves in every moment. Seeing this lack of solidity can be very unsettling at first, but it also provides a life changing liberation.

As our minds loosen their obsession with our practical affairs and everyday identities, we can open to glimpses of the inner peace that underlies our restlessness and discontent. And when the retreat is led well, we are guided further into this inner quietude. Our teachers give us pointers about the roadblocks that inevitably surface and about how to navigate them. When the ramblings of the mind rest in abeyance, we are allowed to peer into our unconditioned, true nature. However imperfect the glimpses may be, we will never again be the same. We now know that although it is often shrouded, within us lies a reservoir of ease, a source of well-being and inner wisdom. We realize that we simply need to learn to return to this wellspring within. And we see that retreats offer a safe vehicle that protects us from distraction on this inner journey.

Identifying Loneliness

FOR ME, RETREATS remain an essential part of spiritual unfolding. On one particular retreat in Burma, I encountered an emotional whirlwind that threatened to spiral me into deep despair and doubt. I had been away for a few weeks and was missing my husband and 8-year-old daughter immensely. I looked around and saw few wedding rings on the other meditators. I tormented myself, imagining I was practically the only one with attachments at home -no doubt the only mother with a young child. I deserved to be having a difficult time, I thought. I had come at the wrong time in my life. My family needed me; I should never have left them for so long. Even more, I felt I needed them.

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This story ran obsessively inside me, and I became unable to focus my mind. I lost sight of the intentions that had brought me halfway around the world. I even considered leaving. After a few days of this, realizing I needed some help, I brought up my inner state with my teacher. I knew he too had a spouse far away, so I asked him about missing her. His reply went straight to the heart of my longing.

“Have you ever noticed that in their presence you also sometimes feel this yearning?” he asked. When I nodded, he continued. “In reality it is not them you are missing so much, You are missing you! You are missing being at home inside yourself, and you are displacing the feelings, blaming it on the absence of your family. This disconnected feeling remains with us, whomever we are with and wherever we go, until we are finally willing to stop chasing temporary circumstantial happiness. Once you touch your own inner reservoir of joy and contentment and learn to rest there, it won’t matter so much where you go or whom you are with. When the voices of discontent resurface, you won’t emotionally identify with them, and they will vanish as easily as they came. Only then will you experience true happiness. Of course, you will still have people you are naturally closer to, but the attachment to their presence will subside. You will carry them in your heart with you everywhere, in the place where your own inner radiance already shines.

After our conversation, I returned to my practice aligned again with my initial commitment to awakening, reminded that the retreat was a superb opportunity to accelerate my release of conditioned, habitual ways of being. I felt reassured that it would enable me to be more present and loving, and

therefore a more compassionate and mature wife and mother. When I returned home and my husband and daughter sensed the changes in me, they became even more enthusiastic in their support of my retreat time. We had all confirmed that being committed to a spiritual life and being in a worldly life need not be in conflict.

Having had many such experiences of new insight and growth on retreat, I can think of no better way to uproot the weeds of discontent. When we start going on retreats, we can find the glimpses we get into the true Self to be a beautiful blessing and an incredible resource. Through the hours of meditating, we can come to witness our internal warring voices from a place of impartial interest, eventually realizing that no one can dispel the discontented false self except us. Certainly, we need compassionate teachers to point the way and redirect us when we get derailed from our intentions but, they cannot do the work for us. Only dedicated use of the tools of practice, again and again, gradually transforms us. Instead of identifying ourselves as bad or wrong, we learn to dis-identify from the charade of the ego-self and to begin the slow, gradual process of compassionately metabolizing these patterns into our larger nature, our authentic Self. More than any other practice I know, retreats are the way to make ourselves accident prone to the grace of presence.