

Short Solitary Retreat

Written by Andy Wistreich, from IKN Newsletter: Volume 1, Number 3, 1999.

I'd like to recommend everyone to do solitary retreat to enhance their Kalacakra practice. As often as possible. Most of us have jobs so we can't get away for very long. However, I don't think this should be a deterrent. I have found that even three nights (two full days) is extremely worthwhile. Four or five nights is very effective indeed.

Everyone is different, and the more you do these short solitary retreats, the more easily you find a structure and regime that suits your personality and need. It's good to get the right balance between relaxation and high structure. Unlike an approximation retreat where one is working with a traditional structure towards a mantra count for example, it is not essential to do four sessions per day, with the first before dawn.

However, I do find that to start before dawn each morning is very helpful, as the mind gets subtler around dawn, so you get the benefit of what His Holiness has called the connection between internal and external enlightenment.

I find it best to do the preparation of the retreat place, like getting the food in and the altar set up, in the afternoon, and then after tea, to start the retreat. Once started I think it's best to make a personal commitment not to get into conversations etc with anyone, and not to get into any activities which don't support the retreat. So, for example, it's helpful to go for a walk to stretch your legs and freshen your energy, but I don't think it is helpful to go out to look at the countryside or whatever. It's a personal commitment to focus inwards for a few days – quite a rare experience for most of us!

I think you need to have planned well in advance which practices you are going to focus on, and then use the retreat for familiarisation with the practices. In the Kalacakra group we have been introduced to a number of different practices, and I think we all like to do the sadhana in a group, because there is strength in being with others. However, unless we familiarise ourselves with the practices, and get some sort of autonomy to the practice, I don't think we can progress very far. In the long term we should all aspire to do the full retreats of the generation stage and the completion stage, and reach the final goal. After all, it is said to be possible in one lifetime! In order to set out towards that goal we need to get to know the practices. This just requires effort and repetition. The ideal situation for this is in retreat, without TV, telephone, friends, work and home hassles of all kinds. The mind just *has* to get more towards its natural state!

Personally I find it helpful on the first evening to do some strong motivational practice, like going through the whole Lam Rim, or focussing on bodhicitta practices. This sets you up for the whole retreat. If at any time as it goes on you feel you've lost the purpose, you can go over this again. Then at the end – and I tend to like to finish before lunch on the last day – I think it is good to do a strong dedicatory practice, such as reciting the tenth chapter of the *Bodhicaryavatara*. Then each of the other days needs a rough pattern, and this is where one needs to get the right degree of strict or loose timetabling. Because my work is very time-bound, I rebel on retreat, and don't look much at my watch – just go by the feel. However, others may find that the start and finish times being decided in advance helps to keep them focused. It's all about knowing yourself.

I should have mentioned that I think that self-catering is the best. It gives you complete involvement. When I do solitary retreat with someone else cooking, I always wonder what they're cooking and form critical judgements of the cooking. When I cook for myself I can get the balance between blandness and flavour right for what I need. Again it is all about autonomy – self-reliance.

I'd like to recommend a retreat centre in Herefordshire where they have a good retreat hut in the garden with an adjoining toilet/washroom. In the hut there is a two-ring gas stove, a bed/meditation-shelf, and a table and chair for eating or reading. What's more it has an almost total blackout at night, which is useful for the six-branched yoga. It costs £5 per night, but it's free if you can't afford it. Phone and speak to Elaine or Paul, or email them. The address is:

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If anyone is interested in doing a short solitary retreat, and would like to talk over their plans for it in advance, please feel welcome to give me a ring on (01460) 241339.