

## The Value of Retreat and Extended Practice

If you have been coming to one of the sitting groups for awhile, you might consider attending a daylong retreat or even going to a multiple-day residential retreat. What are the benefits or value of attending a daylong or a multiple-day retreat?

As you may know, when we sit together for 30-45 minutes, sometimes it may take awhile for the mind to settle. Depending on how busy the mind is, the worries and concerns we have, and the momentum of the mind, it may take some time for the mind to collect and begin to calm down to begin to have some ability to stay on our object of attention. And then, the bell rings. “Drat!” you say to yourself – “I was just getting calm,” or “I was just getting the hang of it.” Maybe we just get a taste of a calm, still mind. Over time, if we practice every day, we can cultivate a mind that more easily settles, and perhaps we begin to gain some insights into our relationship with our experience and how the mind may contribute to, or may not contribute to, our experience of *dukkha* (that sense of dissatisfaction, dis-ease, unhappiness, wishing things were other than what they are).

In order to gain deeper insights, to see more clearly, and to begin to dislodge some of the deeper patterning of our minds, we need to have longer periods of practice, so the mind gets a chance to settle, stay settled, so we can observe our experience more clearly. You might imagine that you want to see the details of the craters on the moon. If you have a telescope, it would be hard for the image to be clear and to see any details if we were holding the telescope in our hands. We can't hold it still enough with a high-power lens to get a clear, steady image. What we need is a tripod to put the telescope on so the image will be steady and we can focus clearly on the details. Even so, it takes practice to see the details; to understand how the shadows can make things look reversed, or to get our orientation of the lunar landscape. Similarly, in our own meditation practice, we need to have the mind calm enough so that it can clearly perceive the details of our experience. It takes time for our practice to mature and it takes time for the mind to develop steadiness. We also need to cultivate the sensitivity to notice the finer detail of our experience. As soon as we get up from the cushion in our daily lives, we often can't carry the same quality of attention as we had while sitting, because we have a multitude of distractions: from cell phones to children or pets, to work or running a household that impinge on us.

Spending a day (or more) in silence, secluded from the normal everyday distractions, provides us an opportunity to allow the mind to settle and to practice developing this steadiness of mind for a longer period of time. If we use this time wisely and diligently, we can begin to clearly see patterns of our behaviors; we can start to notice ripples in the calm when the mind begins to grasp or cling to something. Those cumulative moments help to strengthen our mindfulness as well as gain insight into how we cling and grasp – to see how *dukkha* arises and also to even experience moments when *dukkha* may end. We also have the opportunity to practice mindfulness off the cushion, as we walk, eat, use the toilet, and other activities. We get a chance to pay attention throughout the day to know what it is like to move from sitting to standing to walking to even lying down with the intention of watching the mind. We can know what it is like to have a mind that is a little clearer or more steady.

Going on a multiple-day residential retreat lets us explore even further as we get to even pay attention to that part of the day when we lie down and go to sleep. We give up all the daily distractions of our everyday world for a short period of time; we don't even have to worry about our meals! Instead, we're given a precious opportunity for dedicated practice and to find out what it is like when we allow more than just one day for the mind to become settled. We can explore giving up all of our distractions and entertainments; and even the burden of speaking! Some of you might not see speaking as a burden, but you might be surprised what a luxury it is to not have to speak to anyone and to be able to just focus on our inner experience. We have more momentum to stay mindful for larger stretches of time and we have opportunities to experience a mind that is perhaps a little less caught up, or a mind able to see the conditioned nature of how we experience the world around us.

I highly encourage anyone who is interested, to try a daylong – particularly one that is silent and devoted to a whole day of practice (we have one coming up on Mar. 23rd). Or, try a silent multiple day retreat. If you don't think you can afford it, the Insight Retreat Center offers dana retreats (freely offered including room and meals). Ideally, if you have the time, I recommend at least 7 days – it will give you enough of an opportunity to get over the initial time it takes to settle and you'll be able to really benefit from that. A shorter retreat can be useful, if that's all you can do. But in shorter retreats, by the time you're really settling in, it's already time to leave.

In future newsletters, some of our sangha members may wish to share their experiences of being on retreat.

– Lori Wong