

Long Retreats: Anchor to Our Practice

A talk by Mu Soeng Sunim at Providence Zen Center on February 12, 1989.

In talking about long retreats, or meditation, it is important to remember that one can at best talk only about one's own experiences. In the last five years I have had the opportunity to sit three-month long retreats each winter and summer, so that's a place to start, but each person's experience of a long retreat is unique and different from any one else's experience. At the same time there is a certain commonality of elements so that two persons sharing the same experience can understand what the other is talking about. It is these common elements, in themselves nourishing and nurturing, which have inspired and motivated people to undertake the rigorous long-retreat practice in each succeeding generation.

It might be useful to know a little bit about how the tradition of these retreats came into being in the history of Buddhism. The Buddha's lifestyle, for 45 years of teaching after his enlightenment, was that of a wandering monk. He never settled down in one single place although there were cities and towns where he returned to teach more regularly. The only time his travels were brought to a stop was during the three months of monsoon season when road conditions made travel impossible. During this period the Buddha would settle down in one place along with all the disciples who were traveling with him to wait out the rains. During these three months the Buddha would expound the Dharma to the disciples every day and answer their questions. After his monk-disciples had stayed with him for one or two "rains" the Buddha would encourage them to go out and spread the Dharma on their own. As a result soon there were a large number of monks traveling all over the sub-

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continent of India, either singly or in pairs. During their own travels these monks, too, encountered the hazardous conditions of a monsoon season; so a number of monks would find a place in each region to stay put during the monsoon season, and use these three months as a time for intense personal practice. In the beginning the institution of a monsoon retreat was marginal and not very tightly formulated. Eventually these monsoon retreats came to be institutionalized and structured; a whole body of rules and regulations governing these retreats came into place.

The history of long retreats in China, especially Zen retreats, is not very clear. But in the Korean tradition these retreats have been an integral part of the training of Zen monks at least in this century. It seems reasonable to assume that during the five hundred years of persecution of Buddhism in Korea (the fourteenth through the nineteenth centuries), when the Zen monks stayed deep into the mountains, they must have had some structure of long retreats to sustain them in their isolation. When Korean Buddhism was revived in the early part of this century by Zen Master Kyong Ho, it was also a time of revival of the institution of long retreats; this was done most prominently by two of Zen Master Kyong Ho's foremost

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disciples, Zen Master Mang Gong and Zen Master Han Am. The establishment of Diamond Hill Zen Monastery here in Rhode Island has been a wonderful opportunity for both monks and lay people to connect with our lineage and our tradition through a long retreat each winter and summer. Our teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn, did his early monastic training at Su Dok Sa and Jung Hae Sa, which were temples where Zen Master Mang Gong taught until his death in 1946.

A word about the connotation of the term “retreat”: when a person who has no familiarity with spiritual tradition hears the word “retreat”, it has the connotation of escaping from something. In military parlance, the term “retreat” is synonymous with a general being defeated and withdrawing from the battlefield. So there’s a negative connotation in the popular mind about the word “retreat”. When we look at the word itself we find it has two parts: “re” and “treat”. “Re” means again or one more time; so it means treating ourselves one more time to something. Treating ourselves means taking care of ourselves with kindness and compassion. So a long retreat is a time for reconditioning, reformation, transformation.

The other day several of us were watching a video of Joseph Campbell’s talks with Bill Moyers, from the PBS series. They were talking about myths and the influence of myths on our consciousness. Very early in the video Moyers asked Campbell, “How does the consciousness get transformed?” That’s a very important, key question: How does the consciousness get transformed? Throughout history, different traditions have employed different techniques to bring about a transformation in consciousness. Christianity offers a very clear example of this process: it holds that whatever transformation comes about in an individual consciousness comes from God, comes from outside. Many traditions have some kind of prescription about somebody or something doing it for you from outside.

Last week, I had a visit from a friend of mine whom I had not seen in six years. I knew him ten years ago in the early days of my practice; he was the kind of person who would go from one

I then asked him what exactly was the practice he was doing and, with a flourish, he pointed to the framed picture of his teacher and announced, “HE is my practice.” That was practically the end of the conversation for me. I don’t know anything about his teacher or what this guy did for him but, according to what my friend was telling me about his own life, he was going through a tough time, he had been divorced and was in a bad space. During this difficult time, he started seeing this “teacher” and maybe this teacher said certain things that were helpful to him and created some opening for him. That’s one way of relating to how the consciousness gets transformed.

Zen retreats are a very different kind of process. The tradition of Zen does not depend on any outside power. You have to work with yourself, within yourself, and ultimately what you are left with is your own effort and your own motivation. What you get out of a retreat is how much you apply yourself to transforming your consciousness. You cannot shift the responsibility to someone or something else.

Why do we need to work on our consciousness at all? The basic Buddhist teaching is that our suffering comes from our conditioning. Without understanding this conditioning, it is not possible to get out of the realm of suffering. When we look at the culture all around us, what we see happening to children is that from the age of six months or so, they are put in front of the television and the parents leave, becoming either physically or emotionally unavailable to these kids. Both parents are working and go on to live their own lives. So all the conditioning the child is getting is from whatever goes on the TV, through commercials, through the themes of violence and “getting my way” and “it’s okay to walk all over other people as long it gets you a buck”. The bombardment of these messages is so heavy and insistent, on subtle and gross levels, that children have no tool or training to sort out for themselves what it’s doing to them. When a whole society becomes a victim of this kind of conditioning, it produces a certain kind of adults — teachers, doctors, lawyers, leaders of the business community — who have no idea of who they are or any deep sense of what it means to be human.

In older, traditional societies, there were built-in rituals, like the Vision Quests in the Native American traditions, where people took time to reflect on these very intimate questions about human existence. In our culture, the bombardment of trivial and manipulative information is so insistent there is no time to get away from it. People end up pursuing one sensual experience after another, hoping that the next experience will do it for them, and give them pleasure that will last forever. Of course, this never happens and the search for pleasurable experiences never stops. In this kind of search, the tendency is to get away from any kind of negative experiences — pain, confusion and sorrow, and pursue the pleasurable; thus our whole existence becomes a rollercoaster of grasping and aversion. As a result, there is no real understanding of what’s going on in our lives, especially at deeper levels. When we go into a long retreat, especially three months or longer, it becomes the first time for many of us that we don’t have this bombardment from outside; in the silence of a long retreat, we are forced to deal with the accumulated junk of

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practice to another — sometimes Zen, sometimes Vipassana, sometimes Tibetan Buddhism; not any real serious practice, maybe two or three short retreats a year. But he could stay up all night and talk about “spirituality”. So he called me a few weeks ago and told me he was now living in Boston. I invited him to come visit the Zen Center and he came last week. We were just talking like old friends about what he was doing in Boston, things like that. He told me he was living with a group of people and they were all students of a teacher (a young Westerner) who had attained some kind of enlightenment in India. My friend had framed pictures of his teacher with him and showed these to me.

our minds.

A long retreat is a very powerful tool, and hopefully what comes of this training is what Zen Master Seung Sahn calls "mind-sitting". His teaching style is an echo of ancient Chinese patriarchs of Ch'an. The Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng, talked about attaining "no-mind" but he never talked about how to go about getting this "no-mind." In our own time, Krishnamurthi has also given the same teaching. Zen Master Seung Sahn has been teaching "don't know" or "don't make anything" for forty years; for most of us to attain this teaching we need to do a lot of body-

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sitting. Mind-sitting is the highest attainment we can aspire to, but without a solid background of body-sitting, it becomes just another game. Many people read books on Zen or spirituality and think they are free and wise. This is the one impression I got from my friend when he came visiting: I was talking to him as an old friend but he had all these aggressive questions: "Why do you shave your head?" "Why do you wear these gray clothes?" "Why do you sit on a cushion?" "Why do you have to sit three months?" His whole basic attitude was: "Look, I have discovered the truth, or this person, my teacher, has discovered it for me, he has done this for me; my mind is free to go anywhere, so why can't you be free like me?"

If you don't have twenty or thirty years of solid experience of meditation behind you, it's very easy to get on these trips. And a trip is a trip; the trip of a self-proclaimed spiritual master is no different from the trip of a so-called deluded person. One of my favorite characters in the history of Zen is Zen Master Joju (C: Chao-chou). Joju's life story is very instructive. He had his first awakening when he met his teacher Nam Cheon at the age of eighteen. After this initial opening, he stayed with his teacher for twenty years until Nam Cheon died. Only then did he feel free to travel all over China for the next forty years of his life and engage the self-proclaimed adepts of Zen in dharma-combat. I would not be surprised if Joju had been tempted to say to himself at the age of eighteen "I am a free person" and go on his own. It is not an accident that Nam Cheon and Joju are the most brilliant teacher-student duo in the history of Zen, and the fact that Joju stayed to train with Nam Cheon for twenty years speaks as much for his own genius as for the genius of Nam Cheon.

In order to have the freedom where our mind can go anywhere, anyplace, we have to have a solid grounding, an anchor. And this anchor comes from solid sitting practice, or any other solid, focused practice within the context of a long retreat. The three-month long retreats are a very powerful vehicle in providing this kind of anchor to our practice. There is a big difference between doing a weekend retreat and doing a long retreat. I started sitting Zen and running long-distance at almost the same time. So for me there has always been a very interesting parallel between athletic training and Zen practice. The two or three-day retreats are like a 100-yard dash; you gather your physical energies together and, in one single burst of ten or fifteen seconds, you run your race. It takes a lot of grinding the teeth and applying brute strength. But when you run a marathon or do a three-month long retreat you need a different attitude of mind and a different kind of harnessing energy. You need qualities like patience and perseverance and faith and motivation. In a marathon, it's one foot after another for 3 1/2 or 4 hours; so it's a very different kind of mindset from a 100-yard dash. In doing a 2 or 3 day retreat you can also grind your teeth and sit a weekend but you cannot grind your teeth for three months; the teeth will break. A three-month retreat is a letting go, sitting after sitting, hour after

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hour, letting go of our ideas about ourselves, about our practice, about our possible attainment; you have to learn to be kind to yourself, you have to find a balance within yourself where you don't daydream the whole retreat away or drive yourself crazy about your lack of so-called "progress." Eventually these are the qualities —patience, perseverance, faith, motivation — that become both the journey and the fruit that comes out of a three-month long retreat.

A long retreat is like being in prison, especially when you do a group retreat like we do here at the monastery. The routine is all set, you are cloistered and the limits are very clear; you cannot go outside, you cannot talk to other people, you get up at the same time, sit at the same time, eat at the same time, sleep at the same time. This structure can be a very liberating force. Working within the boundaries of the retreat structure, you can go deep within yourself and discover your own strengths and frailties. Gandhi and Lenin did some of their best writing while they were in prison; in that setting they were forced to examine their own struggle and what they wanted to contribute to their societies.

Another way of being in prison is to use this time as a monastic experience. By monastic, I don't mean the outside form of shaved head or certain kind of robes but the fact that your life becomes very simple. There are no choices; and having no choice can bring to rest, perhaps for the first time, that mind which is always, constantly looking for the next pleasurable experience. When there is no stimuli coming in from outside, the mind settles down and has to deal with itself.

This becomes quite evident in the area of food. Different people have different food karma, and this becomes quite prominent in a retreat situation. We had one person recently who signed on for three months but left after three weeks. One of the big issues for him was food; he felt the food was just too good! And for him good food was a problem. It was a problem for him that other people were eating so much. At some level, it was a trip; he wanted a certain kind of relationship with food but, underneath that wanting, something else was going on which he was not willing to look into. Most of the time food is a sublimation. People invest so much in food as a way of not looking at certain things in their life.

Another kind of karma which becomes interesting to watch is sleep. For me, even after ten years of living in a Zen Center, sometimes it's still not easy to get up in the morning. Most of the time it's okay but once in a while this mind will appear that says, "Not today". And that's the function of our "back-seat driver" mind. If we listen to this back seat driver, we will always get caught. But if we can tell it to shut up and move on with whatever needs to be done, it's not so strong. In a long retreat, you don't have any choice; you have to get up at 4:30 a.m. Having no choice in the matter allows the backseat driver to take a rest from its usual routine of playing all kinds of games. When we choose not to listen to the backseat driver for three months, it creates powerful transformations in our mind-body system, not to speak of the self-esteem that comes from self-discipline. We see clearly that not wanting to get up in the morning is the seeking of a

pleasurable experience; sometimes it's "if only I could sleep for five extra minutes", and then the seeking of this pleasurable experience becomes another habit. We live our life through these habits and don't even realize how much our habits control our lives and how we are trying to rearrange our lives around their habits. Our conditioning is such that we don't have the tools or the training to really investigate how much suffering the effort of keeping these habits in place is causing us.

It may even come to the point, when we have practiced for a long time, that we can look at a certain habit of ours and have a completely neutral response to it, neither craving it nor avoiding it. Only in this neutrality is there a possibility of reconditioning, for choosing wisely, and for making wholesome choices which will not result in suffering. In a long retreat it's very easy to see

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that our habits need not control our life, and that it is possible to live in a really simple and uncomplicated way. All we have to do is to use the simplicity and clarity of a three-month retreat as a model for our everyday life and be nurtured by that experience.

When we have good habits, we don't lose energy. Most of the time in our everyday life we lose energy through our eyes and through our thinking. The internal chatter we carry on within ourselves, caught between choosing and not-choosing, is a tremendous drain on our nervous system. Zen Master Seung Sahn claims we lose as much as 80% of our energy through our eyes. In a retreat situation, you spend most of your time sitting on the cushion and there is not much sensory data coming in through the eyes. Gradually the internal chatter also settles down; so the two big sources of the loss of energy are eliminated. After some time, a reverse process, the gaining of energy, comes into place. Sitting in zazen or doing chanting or doing bows involves concentrated breathing in and out from the lower abdomen, the "hara". When we don't lose energy through our eyes and our thinking, and do a practice that energize the "hara", it becomes a tremendous source of empowerment. This empowerment is what allows us to follow a schedule that may seem brutalizing, day after day without much problem.

This empowerment is also something that we uncover for ourselves within ourselves. It is not given to us by someone or something outside. One result of this empowerment is a sense of peace and completeness that comes over the participant. You may have noticed that even if you sit for half-an-hour every morning, you feel more at peace and calm. Many people who have sat three-month retreats have told me that some of the happiest moments of their life were when they were sitting on their cushion. They had no idea of why these happy moments occurred at that time and place; after all, nothing was going on; there was no stimuli, no input coming in from outside. What was happening, instead, was that the mind was quieting down, going deep within its primordial silence. This is called "stillness". Out

of this stillness comes peace, wisdom, and compassion. Out of this stillness comes a simplicity of being that tells us we are complete in each moment; there is nothing that needs to be added or taken away. All we have to do in order to be complete is to be still and silent, in mind and body.

This stillness and simplicity allows us to look at how we relate to food, to sleep, to clothes, to sex, to people we know. What kind of statement are we making by wearing certain kind of clothes? What kind of sublimation are we going through in our attachment to food? What are our deepest feelings about the people and situations around us? For example, if you live in Manhattan, it seems like a normal, natural thing to check out different restaurants, eat different kind of ethnic foods, and then talk relentlessly to those we know about these foods and restaurants. Or talk to them about our wardrobe, or about our jogging, or about movies or books or whatever. These things seem so necessary and such an important part of life in Manhattan, or at least for those who think they like to live in Manhattan, that there is no room to stand outside and see what's really going on in our lives in the guise of these activities. But if you settle down in a long retreat, gradually all these things seem so incidental, so uninteresting compared to the probing of the deepest questions about what it means to be human. Then all these activities and relationship to them can be placed in proper perspective; it is possible to see them simply as toys; it's okay to use them as skillful means but not to get caught in them.

The energy which allows us to become still and silent also becomes very interesting to watch. It's not that it's a constant and once we are grounded in it, it's going to be there all the time. It has its own ups and downs, it comes and goes in its own time and rhythm. For instance, you may be very tired and the moktak is hit for the next sitting, and you go, "Oh my God, I am going to be so sleepy sitting on the cushion for the next two hours", so

Structure can be a very liberating force. . . Gandhi and Lenin did some of their best writing while they were in prison.

there is a basic resistance to going into the Dharma room, but then a funny thing happens; after five minutes of sitting, you are as alert as ever. Or you could be full of pep and start thinking, "Tonight I am going to sit through the whole night and really go deeply into my practice," but that evening you start feeling so tired, for no reason whatsoever, that you can't wait to crawl into your sleeping bag at the end of the last chant. What happens? DON'T KNOW. This is truly one of those experiences about which no explanation is possible. We go through these ups and downs in our daily life, also, but we cover it up through different activities and habits rather than paying attention to what's going in. But in a retreat situation there is nothing to cover your bare

experience, and you have no choice but to learn how to deal with it. In dealing with these experiences, we are dealing with the very essence of our humanity.

So, ultimately, a long retreat is a gift to ourselves, a very precious gift. I believe that a long retreat is one of the truly creative things we as human beings can do for ourselves. All the games we play, with ourselves and with other people, get exposed, and we have to deal in a very direct and nonmanipulative way with the source of our being. This experience becomes all the more precious as our culture gets so complicated and bombards us relentlessly. Taking time off and trying to go deeply within ourselves is an act of generosity toward ourselves out of which comes a wisdom which can be our guide and companion in our journey of life. At the same time, it's important to remember that whether we do a short or long retreat, sitting on our cushion is not a time for solving the "problems" of our life. In that sense, meditation is not therapy. Sometimes people make the mistake of saying to themselves, "I have this problem and I can't seem to handle this right now. Maybe I will go into a retreat, and I will learn how to better deal with this problem." It may be that a clear answer to your dilemma will appear in a retreat situation, but that's a side-effect. What's important to understand is that your perspective on how you relate to life will change. You can learn how to have a very different relationship to a problem or problems but ultimately we have to uncover the wisdom which shows us that a "problem" is a creation of our own thinking and

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has no self-nature of its own; this wisdom shows us that the cause of suffering lies in our own grasping and aversion and not in things and people around us.

This wisdom appears as a result of continuity of practice when we are in a long retreat. Most of the time people find that if they are doing a little practice in the morning and a little in the evening, whatever energy they get out of it gets scattered during the day, through dealing with difficult situations at work or at home. Then faith in practice is hard to come by, and many people stop practicing. When we do a three-month retreat, the continuity allows us to go deeper into silence and stillness and we can see what a tremendous power our mind is: it can liberate us or it can break us. This experience is what gives us faith as our anchor; we can come out into the outside world and live in it with equanimity and even humor. Then morning and evening practice becomes a source of constant renewal and makes our life simple and clear.

What a tremendous power our mind is: it can liberate us or it can break us.

Then it's possible to *just do* what we are doing in the moment and then move on to the next thing in the next moment without a lingering attachment or residue.

In a long retreat, if we pay close attention to the habitual

patterns of the mind, we find that our minds have an inherent need for distraction from the unsatisfactoriness of the moment. Our mind is always telling us that this happening in the moment is not enough, there should be something more. So in order to distract itself from the moment's experience, the mind plays all kinds of games. And once we get caught in these games, we stop paying attention to what actually the mind is trying to get away from. This is where the continuity of practice becomes so important; once we have the discipline of bringing the mind back to the present moment, we are breaking out of the prison which the habits of mind have created. Bringing the mind back, again and again, to the present moment, without any idea of loss or gain, without grasping or aversion, is what our practice is all about. And this process is engaged in most powerfully in a long retreat, which in turn empowers us, enabling us to have a correct relationship to each moment. We can then use this training in the outside world, in being a correct worker when doing our job, being a correct friend when with a friend, being a correct husband or correct wife when with one's spouse, being a correct father when with one's children, being a correct son or daughter when with one's parents. This process is an exact parallel to practice in a long retreat — when bowing, just bow; when chanting, just chant, when sitting, just sit, when eating, just eat, when the moktak is hit, just go to the Dharma room, when the wake-up bell is rung, just get up and use the bathroom. No holding, no checking. In each moment, everything is complete. This wisdom is the door to liberation.

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