

# Retreat at Desaru

Anne Low (Shimso)

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Having spent parts of my life in different places across the globe—Singapore, the United States, Canada, Europe—the notion of home has evolved and come to take on different meanings for me. In the midst of these frequent moves there is, however, a place that has become like a home to me. That is the Pengerang/Desaru Zen retreat center in Johor Bahru, Malaysia, which is run by Gye Mun Sunim (also known by his Chinese title of Sifu), who is the abbot of Kwan Yin Chan Lin in Singapore. Over the years, whenever I return to this part of the world, I would take the boat bound for the other side. In the past few years, I had gone to Pengerang, but this March the retreat was held at Desaru. Whether the retreat is held at Pengerang or Desaru, there are always a few constants I could count on: the sincere practice of regular and new practitioners who lift themselves from their busy lives to just sit and ask “What am I?”; the ever-inspiring guidance of Zen Master Dae Kwang and Gye Mun Sunim JDPS, who teach by example, year after year, what it really means to do our job and to stay the course; the dedicated community of volunteers who turn up just to cook for us; and, last but not least, the trees, the sky and the sea.

At Pengerang, the monkeys drumming the rooftop would accompany us for breakfast, black and white birds fill the gardens, and koi fish nestle in the pond with the salamander—a long-time resident. At Desaru, just a half hour away from the Pengerang retreat center, nature man-

ifests itself yet more differently—and Gye Mun Sunim took full advantage of that on the day we fasted.

One of the special features of the seven-day retreat at Desaru is an all-day fast on the fifth day. I had done the fast before, and each time, come evening I would feel so depleted and weak that my legs felt like jelly. The memory of that returned as I weighed whether to sit it out this time round. But the strength of together action once again overcame the tiny self chattering inside my head. On that day, after the last afternoon sitting at 4:30, a dozen of us rode out in three cars toward the ocean. In less than ten minutes, we arrived at the edge of the South China Sea. The undulating coastline, fine sandy beaches and big, magnificent waves have made Desaru one of the most popular beachfronts in Malaysia. At the sight of the vast expanse of sea and sky, all worries about an empty stomach and depleted energy dropped away. I cheered up and felt confident that I could survive the evening after all.

“We only have to conserve enough energy to get through the evening,” I said. And in this spirit, I added to another long-time practitioner, “Good thing we don’t do the 108 bows tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, there’s 108,” came the response.

Oh. That was news to me. My face paled. Doing 108 bows after a day’s fast! No way! Can’t do! The tiny self started chattering in my head again. If I had known, I wouldn’t have gone for it. Too late! In the midst of those doubting voices, I heard another voice: “Just do it.” OK, I thought to myself, trying to be brave.

We scattered along the beach. Some walked, others napped under coconut trees, and some others went scouting for seashells. My feet caressed the sand and water, and all worries instantly left with the outgoing waves. I watched the waves, mesmerized by each effort to gather their energy for the long haul toward the shore. Strung like long white ribbons, each wave curled and rolled like a sprinter bound for the finishing line, not letting go until it had reached its destination.



Photo: Anne Low

Watching their dramatic wash up the shore, I was filled with marvel. Desaru truly deserves its reputation as one of the best beaches in Malaysia.

The sea beckoned. Unable to resist, I rolled up my shorts and went in, thinking I would go only knee-deep. But the sea had other plans. A big wave came marching in and knocked away my legs and tossed me headfirst into the sea. In that royal dunk, there was no time or space for a single thought. There was only don't know. After that, it was just following the situation, moving in and out with the incoming and outgoing waves.

Conserve energy? Nah! After the initial shock, I jumped back into the water and rolled with the waves.

Zen Master Seung Sahn once said that if you want enlightenment, you just have to go to the tree and stand before it. To the tree, I would add the sea. Before the vast oceans, even the small nagging mind stands at awe and can't help but shrink and wilt. All of nature is our teacher, and at Desaru and Pengerang, nature sits in abundance. Only mind, ears and eyes need to be emptied to receive their teachings.

When we returned to the retreat center, our faces were bright and bristling with energy and smiles as big as the gifts each had received from nature. And sure enough, the next morning, when it came to bowing, it was just bowing, 108 times, no more and no less. As I went out to the garden to cool off, I found myself still brimming with energy, elated at having completed the day of fasting followed by morning bows, in spite of earlier reservations. As I took deep breaths, aware that nature was just waking up, it occurred to me then that this mind truly makes everything! Yes, no, can do, cannot do—this mind shapes our entire world, and when we fail to see that, this checking

mind becomes our master. “Just do it” had to be the single best antidote to the “cannot mind.”

From this, a further insight emerged. The 108 bows we just did weren't just bows, but were actually energetic affirmation of our resolve to fulfill the four great vows we had chanted together before bowing: “Sentient beings are numberless; we vow to save them all. Delusions are endless; we vow to cut through them all. The teachings are infinite; we vow to learn them all. The Buddha Way is inconceivable; we vow to attain it.” And when the compass is thus set in that direction, the mind's constant gyrations and checking become mere ripples. Whether we want to or not, whether we feel like it or not, just put it down. Just do the bows, even when you don't feel like it. Just chant, even when you feel like skipping it. Just enter into retreat when you find yourself looking for excuses not to go. And as the tumbling waves had shown, help is always on hand. When the direction is clear, the universe conspires to help: the waves become our teachers; the trees talk; the sky is dharma; fellow practitioners are our sangha. When we surrender our small selves, we become one with it and all of nature.

The geckos and butterflies beckon at Pengerang. The sea at Desaru and the uncountable waterfalls await you. Each is complete and sings its own perfect song. It has become a place where I can retreat when things get too hot outside. Over the years, it has become home. But don't take my word for it. Please come and experience it for yourself. ♦

Anne Low is a writer and is currently looking for a publisher for her first novel. She grew up in Singapore but now resides in Toronto. She leads a small meditation group in downtown Toronto on Wednesday evenings. She can be reached at [anne1505@gmail.com](mailto:anne1505@gmail.com).

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