

HOME-RETREAT GUIDE

We find ourselves in a time (i.e., now) and place (the world) with an intense array of stressors that threaten to endanger our physical and mental health, cause wild swings of emotion, and strain close relationships. Certainly, now's the time to be grateful for our Dhamma practice, to nourish ourselves with its fruits, and then... *kick it up a notch*.

Fortunately, most of us are stuck at home, which means now may be the perfect opportunity to explore the benefits of home retreat. And since I've been around that particular block many times, I'm offering this short Guide for those of you who have little experience with this form of practice. First off, understand this: You can do it.

Introduction

The Vital Role of Retreats

The Buddha emphasized the need to cultivate Dhamma practice in our everyday lives. At the same time, however, his discourses consistently speak to the necessity of extended periods dedicated to formal meditation practice. That's how one is able to see deeply and directly into the nature of things, especially the subtle —and problematic— workings of the mind.

We need to *retreat* —to unplug from the world for a while— before the mind's obscuring dust clouds will begin to settle... all that compulsive thinking, fretting, wanting, fantasizing —the doing, doing, *doing*. Further, the more time we allow the dust to settle, the more clearly we can see what's what, thus allowing deeply affecting insight to arise. For these results, there's no substitute for retreat.

Any period of retreat —whether it's a single day, a weekend, or a month— any substantial period is a precious gift we can offer to ourselves, for the benefit of all beings, near and far.

The Benefits of Self-Retreat

I took up the practice of self-retreat about 20 years ago, first at Wat Metta, then several solitary periods in the Mojave Desert and Death Valley. Now I've settled into a pattern of winter retreats right here at home.

Here are two benefits I've found:

First, there's less to stimulate the mind when the retreat is (relatively) solitary. There's no one else for us to watch, accommodate, or judge—and no worries about *being* judged. What a relief. Another calming feature is having personal control over the schedule and meal menu.

Second, self-retreat builds confidence and gives us a sense of accomplishment. We needn't always depend on others to inspire, encourage, and keep us on track. It's empowering!

Am I Ready for This?

Yes, and here's why: You control what kind of practice you'll be doing, along with the retreat's length and schedule. (If you have kids, for instance, the nature, length, and schedule of your retreat will likely differ from those of someone without kids.)

And if not now, when? (That's a rhetorical question, folks.)

Preparation

Get Household Buy-In. Unless you live alone, you'll obviously need to talk at length with others in your household about home retreat, especially if the idea is new to them. They may be fully supportive right off the bat, but it's almost certain that some flexibility will be needed to harmonize your needs with theirs. Bottom line: *You do not want to enter retreat in a charged atmosphere.*

Length. If your living circumstances easily allow for a home retreat, but you're apprehensive about jumping in, maybe start with just a day or two. Once your confidence builds, consider stretching beyond your comfort zone to a week or 10 days. Whatever length you choose, commit yourself to it.

Clear the Decks. Complete or postpone pending projects, business, and chores. You don't want to squander precious retreat time on non-urgent matters, or needlessly stimulate the thinking-planing-doing mind.

Make a Schedule (sample below)

Formal-Practice Time. In my experience, mental "dust clouds" don't settle well or quickly without at least six sitting and three walking periods a day. (Your mileage may differ.)

Sleeping Hours. Consider reducing your usual hours for sleep. For long retreats, however, take into account any negative effects you've previously encountered with prolonged reductions in sleep.

Meals. Some people—even layfolks— thrive when following the monastic rule of not eating after mid-day. Give it a try (unless of course you need to eat later for health reasons). Speaking personally, I'm useless without some food in the late afternoon. What works for me is having two modest meals: breakfast and an early dinner.

Dhamma Talks. On a solitary retreat, Dhamma talks can provide guidance, inspiration, and encouragement, and can help relieve feelings of isolation. But don't overindulge; I suggest you schedule a maximum of one talk per day. And choose the talks beforehand—don't stimulate the mind by 'Browsing for Dhamma' during the retreat.

Sample Schedule

15 min:	Get up; morning hygiene
45 min:	Sitting Meditation
90 min:	Meal (prep, eat, cleanup)
30 min:	Walking Meditation
60 min:	Sitting Meditation
30 min:	Walking Meditation
45 min:	Sitting Meditation
60 min:	Stretch, exercise, rest
45 min:	Sitting Meditation
30 min:	Walking Meditation
60 min:	Sitting Meditation
45 min:	Shower etc. (as needed; every 3rd day?)
90 min:	Meal (prep, eat, cleanup)
30 min:	Walking Meditation
45 min:	Dhamma talk
45 min:	Sitting Meditation
60 min:	Tea, Dhamma study (optional)
30 min:	Walking Meditation
45 min:	Sitting Meditation
---	Retire or continue practice

On Retreat

Precepts and Devotional Practices

In our tradition, meditation retreats begin with taking *The Five Precepts*.¹ This practice establishes a foundation of virtue, supporting both joy and ease. You may also find it uplifting to start and/or end each day with lighting a candle and incense, and chanting the *Homage to the Buddha* (*namo tassa*, etc.) and *The Three Refuges*.² Of course, if such devotional practices are not your thing, that's just fine.

Stick to the Plan

Resolve to complete the length of retreat you've chosen (absent extraordinary circumstances). Also resolve to follow your daily schedule, but then be open to sensible adjustments, especially on longer retreats. For instance, if the mind is hopelessly sluggish, departing from the schedule to increase walking time may be helpful.

The Spirit of Renunciation

Retreats provide an opportunity to practice simplicity and relinquishment. The untrained mind is perpetually demanding to get what it wants. It's not used to being told "no." Now's an ideal time to teach it some restraint.

Moderation in Sleeping & Eating. I've already talked about moderation in sleep. As for eating: Monastics are trained to use food merely to fuel their practice and allay hunger. That's something to reflect on during your retreat. At times you may be tempted to eat excessively, looking for comfort, or trying to quell anxiety or aversion. But over-indulging isn't worth the price. If you eat a large or heavy meal, it might take you hours to perk up, which can trigger a wave of self-judgment. (Voice of experience, here.)

Observe Noble Silence. This means no unnecessary conversation. And it's a good idea to define what's "necessary" beforehand.

No screen devices (except for Dhamma talks). Unplug —it's detox time!

No entertainments. This includes snacking due to boredom or agitation. Communing with nature is great, within reason. (I once misspent hours on retreat entranced by the frenetic activities of an ant colony.) Usually, whether or not something is entertainment will be obvious. If you're not sure, however, just assume it is.

Themes of Practice

As I said, self-retreat builds self-confidence, and that usually means overcoming self-doubt. That's why setting a schedule and fixed ground-rules is important. Still unresolved, however, is the *substance* of the retreat practice. For example, how do you tell which method of meditation is best at any given time? ...So there you are again: self-doubt.

My advice is to keep it simple. Consider this approach:

Start off with a grounding form of meditation known as tranquility (*samatha*) practice. In the Thai Forest tradition, the most common form is mindfulness of in-and-out breathing. Another form is *metta* (kindness) practice, where you repeat phrases of good will for yourself and others.³ These and similar practices allow the mind to settle, develop a clarity of focus, and lay a foundation of happiness and ease.

After substantial time devoted to tranquility practice, turn your mind toward cultivating insight and wisdom. There are countless avenues for doing this, but the touchstone is to directly see and reflect on *The Three Characteristics*.⁴ These practices uncover for us how the world truly operates, both internally and externally. Equally important, we understand how the world does *not* operate. When delusion is completely replaced by understanding, then *dukkha* (suffering, discontent, stress) comes to an end.

Kalyanamitta (Spiritual Friends)

If you are new to self-retreat, reaching out to a teacher or experienced kalyanamitta might be a good idea. They could offer encouragement and, if they know you reasonably well, they might be able to give you personalized suggestions.

Because I so strongly believe in the power of self-retreat, I'm making myself available as well: matthewgrad@gmail.com.

Wishing you a fruitful retreat,
Matthew Grad

¹ Link for reciting [the Five Precepts](#). Download and go to page 129.

² Link for reciting [the Homage and Three Refuges](#). Download and go to page 128.

³ Links to guided meditations:

On metta and mindfulness of breathing [by Thanissaro Bhikkhu](#) (Ajahn Geoff).

On metta [by Sharon Salzberg](#).

⁴ The Three Characteristics:

Anicca: Everything in the world is impermanent, in flux, uncertain, and unreliable. We can't know for sure what the near or far future will bring.

Dukkha: Not knowing for sure what's going to happen causes stress and anxiety. And since everything is in the process of decay, trying to hold on to anything (such as having a healthy body) will bring grief and suffering, sooner or later.

Anatta: Since everything is transient, there is no core essence we can call the self. And why would we want to? As the Buddha put it, *That which is unreliable and inherently stressful is unfit to be taken as "me" or "mine."*