

# **30 DAYS ON A CUSHION MEMORIES FROM A MEDITATION RETREATS**

I was asked to write about my experiences doing long meditation retreats. Why do them and what do I get from them?

I will share some experiences from a 30 day meditation retreat I did beginning on March 1, 2008 and ending April 1, 2008.

The retreat was held at a Zen Center, which is located in Cumberland Rhode Island USA. The 30 days that I participated in was the last 30 days of a 90-day meditation retreat. The name for this kind of retreat is called “Kyol Che”, which means “tight dharma” in Korean and just as the name implies it is a very tightly run program. I shared a room; the time is scheduled from 3:00am until 9:00pm, I had very little “free time”. I sat Zen meditation for 10hrs a day in 30 minute segments with 10 minutes walking meditation in-between each segment, the meditation periods are from 1 ½hrs to 3hrs long. There were two chanting sessions each day, one in the morning and one in the evening, they were 45 min each. Three meals each day were conducted in a formal “temple style” which is pretty quick and gives you just enough time to eat, is not about savoring your food but eating to support your meditation practice.

I had to show up for every segment of the schedule, I couldn't decide that I would sleep-in or take some personal time. Between 3:00am and 9:30pm, there were 2 ½ hrs of “un-scheduled time”, time for a nap, laundry, a shower, a walk or doing extra meditation. Except for announcements the retreat was done in silence, e.g. no talking.

It is a powerful experience not speaking. One thing that I have noticed is how sensitive I am and how much I pick up from others and from the environment without talking. Talking can be a big distraction to how I am really feeling and to what is really going on

around me. When the distraction of talking was taken away I observed my thoughts and feelings more clearly and started to see the world around me with more clarity.

You are probably asking yourself “why would he put himself in that kind of situation?” (It is very much like being in the military except the purpose is very different) I have asked myself that question often during a long retreat...”what was I thinking that I thought I should be here”, “ they are so mean”, “ I want to eat slower”, “I don’t want to sit next to this person”, “I don’t like that person over there” “How come things aren’t the way I want them?” and on and on and on and on and on, every minute of every hour of every day, non-stop.

A Zen teacher was asked, “Where does trouble come from”? The teachers’ response was “from you”.

When you engage in a long retreat it is like entering a pressure cooker, you “cook” your karma, it starts to boil and bubble and froth and foam, you get to experience directly without any distraction what the teacher meant when he said, “trouble comes from you” not as a theory or an idea but in a very real and raw way. In yoga this process is called, “Tapas”, “burning off” karmic impurities. When you burn off the impurities you get to the bright shining light that is within you that is you. The impurities are the things that we cling to (our opinions, ideas, very desperately but which are covering up are real treasure within us.

I have been a dedicated Zen practitioner for the past 28 years and have spent many hours in meditation, doing daily practice and long retreats. I’ve learned from experience that when you enter into a retreat you really have no idea what the retreat experience will be like. On all the retreats that I’ve done I always discover new territory within or uncover another layer or unmask another delusion I’ve been operating on.

I am very sincere about practice and stripping away the “coverings” and “delusions”, I enter a retreat with a strong intention, it is not a vacation, it is time to uncover another layer and get deeper into the truth of who I am.

I sometimes share with my friends who have not done long retreats that I am going on one and they will say, “oh that’s so wonderful that you are taking time to be with yourself” or “I hope that you have a good time”, and I always wonder what they are talking about. This is not taking “personal time” like I’m taking a “personal day at work” and there are very few “good times” to be had. This is battle and can be very frightening, this is entering into the lion’s den and there is a lion in there. It is also very exciting like being a great explorer on a continent that you’ve visited before and found many treasures and you are returning for more exploration but there are very real dangers you have to stay very alert and there are no guarantees.

Zen Master Seung Sahn who was a great Korean Zen Master would often say to us about the practice of sincerely finding your “true self”, “Put it down, put it all down, your opinions, your condition and your situation, moment to moment keep correct opinions, correct condition and correct situation. That means perceive the situation and act accordingly”. In a retreat this means put down your opinions and follow the schedule and retreat rules.

When I came to the Zen center for the 30-day retreat I was in deep sadness and had much fear inside. I had separated from my wife earlier in the year and there where many changes happening in my life. I was coming to this retreat to clear my mind, find strength and clarity for this next phase of my life. Unfortunately when I got off the plane after traveling 8+ hrs from the west coast to the east coast and went to pick up my luggage I wasn’t paying attention to how I was picking up an awkward heavy bag and I hurt my back. So right from the beginning of the retreat what I had expected to happen (I would do strong meditation) was thrown out the door. I was in pain and didn’t feel very strong; I needed to adjust my expectation. Fortunately I have a strong yoga practice and I am confident that with time I can heal injuries in my body so I didn’t panic.

The Zen Master who was leading the retreat and I had know each other for many years she was one of my first teachers, I was

happy to be practicing with her. But from the beginning of the time that I was there we got into conflict. She didn't like the way that I was chanting and asked that I change it. I chant very loudly and strongly and have always done so and it has been a source of conflict with some people that I practice with so I was not happy that she was criticizing me. Then a couple of days later we were sitting meditation and during one afternoon session she admonished us for being sleepy during meditation practice, it went something like this,

“More than a third of you were sleeping during the last sitting period, you need to know that sleeping during meditation is not good and your meditation practice is a discouragement to those around you who are trying to stay awake you need to make more of an effort to stay awake”. Now, at this retreat besides the Zen Master, I was the next most senior meditation practitioner (of our Zen school) in the room and I'm thinking, “Those poor beginners, I used to have a sleeping problem too but one day they'll do better” and I set myself to meditation.

About 10 minutes into the sitting period the Zen Master turned to me (I was sitting next to her) and said, “WILL YOU WAKE UP!” and I realized that I was one of the people that her admonishment had been directed towards. I was devastated; I had a hard time breathing and my heart raced. My meditation practice is very important in my life and I do it not only for myself but to become a better person and be of help in the world. To have someone say to me, “your practice is a discouragement to those around you” is probably one of the most painful things that anyone could have said to me. I was shocked, and deeply hurt and very angry. I was not only angry with the Zen teacher but I was also angry with myself, “WHAT WAS I DOING?”  
“I HAD BEEN PRACTICING FOR 28 YEARS AND I WAS  
“WORSE” THAN A BEGINNER!”

This was a very important moment in my meditation practice. I thought that I was awake and meditating, I really did. I was not there to play games. I was very sincere in my effort. It gave me a big question. How could I think that I was awake and meditating and be asleep at the same time? I decided to stand up for meditation and not sit down again until I could tell whether I was awake or asleep. Zen Master Seung Sahn had a very wide teaching. He taught that what you were doing with your mind was much more important than what position your body was in. Your intention to understand yourself was what was most important in Zen practice.

I would stand up for the next 2 days for over 10hrs per day. Now, that might not sound terribly difficult but remember I had hurt my back recently so it was extremely painful to stand up for long periods of time but I was determined. I had another dialog with the teacher over the next couple of days that was insightful to me. I mentioned to her that during meditation I could not tell whether I was awake or asleep, she said, "this practice is about being aware" to which I responded, "oh I am aware" she said, "how can you be aware if you don't know if you are awake or asleep?" I did not have an answer for that. It was a very simple interchange but very helpful for me.

I think that I think is very important to any learning experience between a teacher and student is that there is a dialog between teacher and student, student and teacher. The student needs to ask the teacher questions so that the teacher can know where the student is in their practice and how to help them. The student needs to speak to the teacher about what their experience is so that the teacher can guide them in the right direction. The student needs to be courageous because a real teacher will speak to the student authentically and not in a way to please the student but to help them and this may be painful and frightening to the student. Zen practice is not about the teacher making the students feel better about themselves it is about helping the student "wake up" from delusions and attain their "true self".

So the teacher asking me, “how can you be aware if you don’t know if you are asleep or not?” was what I needed to hear in the moment. I stood with that question, “what is being awake and what is being asleep in meditation?” I discovered a very simple truth, “If I can’t see the floor in front of me, I am asleep, if I can see the floor in front of me I am awake” it was that simple. The truth was not some complicated thing. Being awake was not complicated, if I can’t see what is in front of me I am not awake. This truth made my meditation much more simple. I had been attached to the technique of meditation i.e. I was “doing meditation”, now meditation was the practice of staying awake and being aware of what was in front of me moment to moment. The interchange with the Zen Master, my reactions and my effort had all helped me to achieve an important experience and realization that profoundly changed my meditation practice and for which I am extremely grateful.