

## How to Do Retreat

Meditation retreat is a very meaningful endeavor in which we choose to set aside a portion of time in order to practice meditation more intensively. Through practicing in retreat, we often progress in our meditation much more quickly, due to the greater intensity of our practice.

The word for retreat in Tibetan is *tsam*. It literally means “boundary.” So when we begin a meditation retreat, we are creating a boundary. Physically, we mark a boundary around our meditation area and make the pledge not to leave that space until we have completed our retreat. So of course we need to allow for a kitchen, bathroom etc. in our retreat. Or, conversely we can also allow for someone to bring us meals or for us to leave our retreat in order to receive meals, though this is less often done in longer retreats.

Vocally, we do not speak in retreat except to say prayers, recite our practice liturgy, or chant mantras. Many choose not to receive letters, emails, phone calls, or even text messages while in retreat and will only leave an occasional shopping list for their retreat helper. It’s a good idea to let friends and loved ones know you will be out of contact for a while so they won’t worry about you.

Mentally we stay in retreat by not becoming distracted from the practice we have set out to do in retreat and by reigning in our wild and unbridled thoughts of the past, present and future. We completely steep or permeate ourselves in our meditation practice in a relaxed, yet one-pointed manner. And in this way we set boundaries for our body, speech and mind while in retreat.

It is good to note here that, technically, going to a teaching or seminar for a weekend or even a whole week is *not* a retreat. It is a teaching or seminar. In retreat, we set boundaries that we choose not to cross until we’ve completed a certain amount of practice.

Traditionally there three ways of deciding the length of a retreat: by time, number and accomplishment. *By time* means that we decide to stay in retreat for a specific amount of time, such as one week, one month, one or one year. This is often best for beginners like us and for those who have a limited amount of time each year to spend in retreat. *By number* refers to deciding to stay in retreat until we have recited a certain number of mantras or prayers, such as a hundred thousand or one million. This requires that the retreatant be a bit more flexible with the actual length of the retreat, because we never know *exactly* how long it will take to complete 100,000 recitations of a mantra, though we can estimate. When someone chooses to stay in retreat until he or she experiences signs of accomplishment, such as a vision of the deity, or specific dreams mentioned in the practice text that signify a high level of success, this is called staying in retreat until accomplishment. This involves the greatest amount of flexibility, because it could take years for these signs to manifest. Again, these days, measuring retreat by time is by far the most convenient way of deciding how long to spend in retreat.

Once in retreat, what do we do? Generally, while in retreat we practice in predetermined sessions. The point of maintaining sessions is to create a disciplined retreat structure to ensure that we actually accomplish what we set out to do in the beginning. Without this structure, it is so easy to become lazy and spend more and more of precious retreat time reading and idly milling about or even sleeping the days away. We can do that any time. What a shame it would be if we wasted our time in retreat like that. Retreat is really a precious opportunity for us to delve more deeply into something that has incredible benefits and true meaning, and if we keep this precious opportunity in mind as we practice, our retreat will become light and full of joy.

Traditionally retreat is divided up into four daily sessions with set beginning and ending times. The first session is between waking up and breakfast, the second is between breakfast and lunch, the third is between lunch and dinner and the fourth is between dinner and bedtime. The actual length of each of your sessions is up to you and depends on how long you can sit comfortably, both physically and mentally. Here is an example of a retreat schedule for a beginner:

4:15 AM	wake up, wash face, etc...
4:30- 6:00 AM	first session
6:00-7:30 AM	breakfast
7:30-10:30 AM	second session
10:30 AM-1:30 PM	lunch
1:30-4:30 PM	third session
4:30-6:30 PM	dinner
6:30-8:30 PM	fourth session
9:00 PM	bedtime

Again, this schedule can be adjusted to fit your needs. In retreat it is important to counter balance our laziness with a modicum of discipline. This means it is good to get up as early as seems reasonably possible, preferably at or before first light. Then, in order to get up early the next morning it helps to get a good night's sleep. The purpose of retreat is not to wear you down or tire you out. That's not particularly helpful. Instead, retreat should allow us to gradually progress in our meditation practice, at a comfortable pace, while we maintain a very relaxed and open mind-set. This type of attitude, when combined with an appreciation of our precious opportunity to even be able to do retreat in the first place, is the most helpful outlook we can have in retreat.

In between meditation sessions it is good to read Dharma books, contemplate the instructions of our teachers and the guiding advice of great lineage masters of the past.

With the hope that this advice on retreat might benefit anyone wanting to intensify their own meditation practice, Lama Gerry typed out these words on the day of the glorious Sun of Dharma's arrival in San Francisco, August 24, 2011.