

RETREAT

is an essential element of Vajrayana practice. However, retreat is not just a practice format that allows quantitatively more practice – it also opens up for different qualities to emerge. The basic anatomy of a retreat is its boundaries whose purpose is to generate a certain kind of silence. The boundaries further can be divided into outer and inner, of which the latter is the most important. The outer is simply the environment in which one is doing the retreat, according to tantric tradition in general secluded places like mountain tops, caves etc. are the most ideal but a bedroom can certainly also be a secluded space. The inner is the psychophysical dimension of one's being – the mind, the energetic body, and the physical body. A mountaintop is not going to be boosting your retreat if your mind is racing with thoughts about work, your energy body is racing from that third cup of coffee, and your physical body is worn out from poor sleep. That being said, we don't 'choose' if our mind, energy body, and physical body are quiet and in balance. But we can create the best causes and conditions for it. Furthermore, in Chod, we do welcome and open to even the most frustrating qualities in our being in our practice and retreats.

Practically, this means thinking through how you can the best retreat conditions, given your life situation.

WHERE

Can you borrow a cottage? Camp? (Remember you need access to wifi for the online retreats.) Or is the bedroom your best option?

NEAR AND DEAR

Do you need to communicate about the retreat with the ones in your household? Someone outside, like a parent, child, or friend that you often talk to?

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS

Cut out screen time altogether, if possible, except for the teachings of course. If you have a telephone and don't want to 'disappear' altogether because you want to be reached, consider turning it on in the morning and in the evening – or at such predetermined intervals.

DIET

Anything that might upset the equilibrium of mind and energy body should be avoided. Certainly alcohol, but preferably also coffee. Tobacco is in the Tibetan tradition considered to cloud the subtle anatomy and is in general deemed to be a foul substance by spiritual entities in this tradition. Plan ahead so that you can eat wholesome and healthy food, not too light, not too heavy. See if you can eat more ethically than normally by buying organic food. If you eat meat, consider eating vegetarian, if you are

a vegetarian consider eating vegan. Dedicate the merit of having made these efforts. But be mindful, and avoid pushing yourself too far outside your own comfort zone – the retreat is about practice, not a diet.

SILENCE

Silence here refers to a particular quality of openness, emptiness, clarity, stability, and focus that provides the inner space for practice. It is not something that actually, fully achieved but rather an ideal, a direction, a reference point that guides us as we go about the retreat.

WHEN

Retreats have a beginning and an ending. Traditionally, retreats begin in the afternoon or evening and end in the morning or mid-day. This provides the best transition in and out of retreats.

JOURNALING

Western students sometimes write a diary of their retreat, which they feel helps them think through and process their experiences. It may also generate valuable insights that one can refer back to in preparation for other retreats.

PREPARATION

All of the points outlined above will be easier to facilitate if one sets aside time in advance to reflect and prepare. This not only makes the practical preparations easier but also allows for the emergence of a suitable frame of mind.

MOVEMENT

It is very good, crucial some would say, to a movement being part of the retreat schedule. Preferably, this would be a bodywork practice – the Subtle Body Training is a prime example of this. We move according to the limitations of our bodies, and any type of movement is better than none. By moving, we keep the physical and energetical bodies healthy and stimulated, which improves the quality of meditation and practice. Importantly, it also prevents, or at least eases, lung – which is problems associated with agitated or choked up energies in the subtle anatomy.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESS OF RETREAT

It is typically not possible to predict the experience of a retreat. It might be blissful, boring, exciting, anxious, excruciating – to name but a few examples. In the Tibetan tradition in general, and in Cho, in particular, we avoid both grasping and avoiding whatever comes up in practice. It might be something significant, it might be a 'meditative experience' (Tibetan, Nyam). Whatever it might be, we try to let it move

through us. Which is not always easy. We may sometimes be startled by the power, or the disturbing quality, of an experience in retreat.

The very structure of a retreat increases the occurrence of these events. This is due to the more intense nature of the practice, but also due to increased psychological heat; which here refers to both the psychic heat such as that in Tumo practice, but also the psychological in the Western sense. The inner and outer silence, the boundaries, the practice, creates a kind of psychological pressure cooker, or a decompression chamber, which may lower psychological defense mechanisms and/or release deeper psychological issues.

INTERVIEW

This is why it is important to have a teacher, or at the very least senior students, that can support the practitioner if such strong experiences of kleshas are aroused. There will be an opportunity to meet with Khandro-la in person to discuss your practice, experience, and any questions which may have been aroused during the retreat.