

As many of you know, I have just completed a three-day silent retreat at home. And I was thinking how wonderful it is to be able to make the time to do a home retreat. So often people feel they have to “go somewhere” to get away from home, family and life to be able to do a retreat. But I think one can make a retreat out of what is right in front of you any time you choose to. For me, the idea came, not so much from me, but from a directive from Father as I sat in meditation one afternoon. It came on the heels of work that I had been doing, and so I was rather surprised that I was asked to do it just then and over a weekend, especially since I had planned to “watch” a rare Master Piece Theater on Sunday night, but, as my Teacher said, what would a retreat be if you didn’t make some sacrifice? I laughed but knew the truth of his words. So, anyway, let me say a little about the retreat experience itself, then say a little something about how to build one for yourself/selves.

The retreat that was suggested to me was to “Enter into the Grand Silence.” Nothing more. It didn’t involve fasting or a rigorous schedule. In fact, I could do almost anything, save have noise, such as TV, computers, talking clocks, PDA-reading system or microwave, disposal, dishwasher noise or telepathic communication with my Teachers or verbal communication with my animals. I also was told by Master Hilarion that I didn’t need to fast, as that would be counterproductive given the amount of “work” that was expected. What he meant, of course, is that entering into the “Great Silence” isn’t just lazing around or sitting in meditation contemplating your navel, although, there was a little of each of those included in the retreat days as well. But it does mean that in meditation and “one-pointed awareness,” you are putting out a good deal of mental-emotional energy, and that needs to be balanced in the physical with proper nourishment. Master Hilarion also said that once I spoke, the retreat would be over. – Well, I would have ended the retreat on the first morning as I accidentally spoke to my dog – in a whisper, but words nonetheless. Since I had no contact with Teachers, I decided that whether the retreat was over or not, I would continue and do my best to maintain the Great Silence. Even though I did not achieve a single day where I did not “slip” at least once, still, I consider the retreat a success, and, by the way, so do my Teachers/Guides.

I started at the hour before midnight on Friday, sitting in meditation, while my neighbors had a good game of something or the other with friends who were visiting for the weekend. This family game play lasted for all three nights, but it didn't bother me, as I decided that they were part of the noise I wasn't to pay attention to. And, in fact, I barely gave them a thought, save to notice how loving the sounds of family togetherness was. I went to bed that first night at midnight and rose around 8:00 AM, late for my first morning, but I knew that would change when I adjusted my bedtime. I meditated, took care of animals, cleaned the kitchen a bit, and meditated some more until 10:30 when I did a bit of silent yoga and then prepared for my silent 11:00 o'clock hour. There I meditated more, getting more comfortable with the internal silence. I then made breakfast at 12:30 and ate in silence, making, by the way, as little actual ambient noise in the kitchen as possible. This meant closing cabinet doors and drawers quietly, opening the dishwasher to put in dishes (that would be done on Tuesday morning) silently, and so forth.

This also included a quiet change of clothes, washing up, taking my dog out, and walking as silently as possible, either around the inside of the house or around the complex. In fact, I gave my dog only hand signals during our walk outside and she did beautifully. – I had thought that she and Shizu, my cat, would not do well if I went into total silence, but this was not the case at all. We actually got much, much closer, I think, in part, because I entered into their world of silence. You all know how Jamaica likes to bark and/or whine at me at various times. Well, after her first-day initial bark when I replied with gestures only, she never barked at me again until Tuesday morning. Then she started in on her usual thing of barking and whining to get her way. – But I stray a bit.

After I broke my fast at half noon with a light meal of fruit, nuts, yogurt and cereal, I set the water on for afternoon tea so that it would steep like I like the chai tea to be. Then I cleaned up a bit more and went and meditated between 2:00 and 3:30 PM. This is traditionally my hardest time. I always want to fall asleep in the midafternoons, and the first two days, I bobbed back and forth between waking and sleeping. But this too is good, as when one is at that cusp between the awake state and the sleep state, one's ego just isn't there. You begin to be more mindful of your inner dimensions; you can actually "feel" the Christ Self within waking up to your awareness.

By the second day, in the morning meditation when I was still sleepy enough to have just a tad of that midafternoon sleepy struggle, I flipped right into the Divine Spark Awareness. It

didn't last all that long, but I think that flavor of it remained with me for the remainder of the retreat. Then, at about 3:30, I took out my puppy, again silently, and we then took our vigorous afternoon walk around the neighborhood. And I then came in to just sit on the couch, have a cup of tea and do nothing for about a half an hour or so. At 4:30, I got up to mindfully prepare a light meal, feed the animals and eat a silent meal. By now, on the second day I was truly realizing that it isn't so much the "outer" dialogue of the world and all its sound, but the inner dialogue that needs to be silent.

I began to truly feel this realization in the early morning of the second day, when I woke (without an alarm or clock telling me the time), at 5:45 AM, did my usual morning ablutions and came out to my sacred space to do my 6:00 AM meditation. It was like there was no struggle at all. I just knew when I went to bed on the first night that I would be up exactly at the right time; and I was. This was equally true for the nighttime shower, final meditation of the night and bedtime; it just happened exactly at the same time each day, including the first day.

I have always found that a balance of work, such as cleaning and work, such as memorization or scripture study, is beneficial in any retreat. Just as the walk balances one's energy in the late afternoons, the morning chores and the nighttime study balance the mind from its relentless desire to distract and delay your progress upon the path. It is also wise to take "breaks" during any retreat intensive, so that one can just sit and stare out a window, stand outside in the fresh air, or just sit and have a cup of hot tea (not coffee; coffee is too much caffeine and wires the mind so that one cannot successfully contemplate/meditate mindfully).

By 9:00 PM, I had rested enough and studied enough that I was ready for the last go-round of the retreat day. I took out my puppy one last time, showered and came into a room that was now completely absent of light and lit a single candle, lit a stick of incense and began my nighttime meditation. This is probably my favorite time, as I can really see the shifts in internal Light/color (gematrian), and external radiations from Heaven (Zohar Light). The time usually goes quite fast once one settles into the deeper part of selfness. The silence just comes. It often feels like a great peace has just descended upon me. By 11:00 PM, I simply went to bed and right to sleep. With all the meditation and inner directedness, there is usually never a problem sleeping, dreaming or waking. Then I did it all over again the next day. It's wonderful. I could live in that state of peace and quiet bliss forever.

So that was what I did. Now for a bit on what you might do to structure a retreat at your house.

If you live alone, it's a bit easier, because there is no need for a written schedule. Of course, when I first started doing retreats at home just prior to my ordination, I did write a schedule and kept to it, too. But now, it's old hat. I set the schedule in my head as the "next thing that should be done in the day," and that's that. But if you live with someone or have family members in your house you may need to do a couple of things before you start.

For couples doing a retreat at home, here are my suggestions:

- Sit down a day or so before the retreat and decide what each of you want to accomplish in "your" retreat. It is important not to "share" these goals, as each soul needs its own quiet, reflective time, and although it's nice to do a retreat in tandem with someone else, it's best if you can "feel" that it is "your" retreat and that the "other" is on "their" retreat.
- Decide on some ground rules, such as no covert or even overt glances to one another to make a point, give a suggestion or make a demand. Just think of the retreat as something you are doing for yourself by yourself. Let the other guy go on his/her way.
- If there are children or adults living with you, make arrangements for "them" to be elsewhere for the period of the retreat, one, two or three days. Then be prepared to turn off all phones, computers walky-talkies, etc., for the duration of your retreat. Put a sign on the door if you need to: "Out of Town" or "Do not Disturb."
- Make a simple meal list and decide who will cook and who will clean. Share the tasks equally, and remember to give the other person the space to be in the kitchen alone and mindfully preparing or cleaning up by themselves.
- Make a schedule or plan for who will shower, what time you will have afternoon tea, when meals are to be eaten in silence, of course, and who will do what household chores.
- During this time there should be no trips to the store, not even if something is forgotten for the meal plan (just make do).
- No running of motors, TVs, radios, alarms, cells phones, or anything else that makes your daily life a non-retreat.
- Let people know you are planning a retreat and how long it will be.
- And, most importantly, don't break your own rules. Stick with the plan and give God a chance.

My suggestions for individuals:

- Plan ahead so that you have done everything ahead of time that needs doing. Pay bills that may come due, make phone calls that need doing, and go to the store for what you would like to eat on your retreat.
- As above, make sure it is a silent, safe retreat and that your friends are aware that this is your plan/goal.
- Follow the suggestions for couples above as you see they apply to you.

About the nature of retreats:

The whole goal of any retreat is to find the spaciousness to find God within. People used to run off to some retreat center and have an “experience,” but the best experiences are often right at home in your own sacred space. It takes a little preplanning and some stick-to-it-ness, but overall it can and will be a wonderful, uplifting experience. Even if you have animals or small children to take care of during this time, they will love it, once they realize that you have entered into their world of silence. Make no excuses for yourself. Just keep silent and keep the schedule. If you need to lay down and rest during a given scheduled time, do it. Then return to the schedule. Don’t make a convenience out of an exception. Remember this is your time to Be.

I also advise only two meals a day, as light as possible, no meat, no coffee, and no heavy or starchy foods. Stay away from sugar, save for one medium sized cookie or piece of fruit a day during your 4:00 PM tea. If you do make a caffeine tea, make it light, so that it will not interfere with your meditation. Remember, you don’t need to have coffee to stay awake during a meditation. If you fall asleep, it is between you and God. Besides, eventually you will realize the opportunity you are missing and you will actually stay awake.

Additionally, I suggest that you decide on some form of light cleaning during each day. This helps the mind focus, brings the one-pointed awareness into perspective, particularly if you have been struggling with ego-formation during your meditation times. And a word about lighting at night. Although sunlight is fine during the days, and especially when you take a vigorous walk outside, the evenings should have reduced lighting. I reduced mine to one bulb in one lamp and a candle on the altar.

I further recommend that you do set up a small altar, if you don’t have one already. Making an offering to God and the Higher Beings of Light is a wonderful sense of devotion and peace.

This reminds me – try not to pray more than once a day. And when you do, do it in your mind, not with your lips. It's about finding your inner stillpoint so that God can talk with you, not the other way round.

Also, find something to study. I don't mean just something to read; I mean actually study in some manner, something related to the theme of your retreat is probably best. And take at least two if not three 20- to 30-minute breaks during each day, evenly spaced, probably after meals, as it is harder to meditate just after eating (you need time to digest). I found I sat for eight or nine hours a day, and that was plenty. You can gage it best for your meditative abilities/capabilities, and then just sit quietly and contemplate during the times you are not doing more active parts of the schedule.

Finally, wear loose, comfortable clothing, nothing binding, including belts for men and bras for women. Try to go without shoes, just socks to keep warm, and have a light blanket nearby to use in meditation, as one's temperature does drop; unless you are a monk and are heating up the room with your ambient energies, it is best to stay warm. Have good ventilation, as one needs fresh air, even if you also need to have the house heat on. That's another reason why it's important to go outside and stand and even walk. One needs to oxygenate one's blood so that one can bring one's mind-body-spirit into perfect balance.

These are a few suggestions based on my many years of zazen practice and life as a Christian mystic. Meditation isn't hard, but deciding to do it is rather the issue. Life after meditation becomes quite sweet, as you have freed the mind from all encumbrances and found that you really can "Touch the Face of God!"

God bless and have a Wonderful retreat!

AliceAnn

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