

Your Life Is Your Practice

An everyday meditation guide

By Glenna Olmsted

*In human life, if you feel that you have made a mistake, you don't try to undo the past or the present, but you just accept where you are and work from there. Tremendous openness as to where you are is necessary. This also applies to the practice of meditation, for instance. A person should learn to meditate on the spot, in the given moment, rather than thinking, ". . . When I reach pension age, I'm going to retire and receive a pension, and I'm going to build my house in Hawaii or the middle of India, or maybe the Gobi Desert, and THEN I'm going to enjoy myself. I'll live a life of solitude and then I'll really meditate." Things never happen that way. —Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, *Transcending Madness**

As a dharma practitioner with a career as well as commitments to care for others, I felt for years that there was seldom time to do solitary retreat. This was something that was continuously on my short list of the most important things to do. Frustrated, I became determined to find a way. Then, when I lived at Gampo Abbey, a Shambhala Buddhist monastery in Nova Scotia, I experienced both practice and work within the same day, every day. This was our way of life there. So here was an answer! I don't have to wait until life gets quiet, or until I'm retired with nothing else to do. Nor do I have to become a nun before I start doing retreat. That's how I began doing "working retreats," and I decided to share the idea with my sangha in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. Word got out to other sangha friends in other places, and one friend who is a journalist said that I needed to share this more widely. So here it is.

My hope is that this way of doing retreat will take the resistance out of establishing a retreat habit for those who thirst to do retreat but can't seem to find the time. The working retreat is not intended to take the place of solitary retreat. It is simply a way to overcome your hesitation to do retreat because you have a job, a business, or other ongoing responsibilities to attend to.

One key to a successful retreat is setting your intentions. If your intentions are clear and focused, the work that you do while on your retreat will become another aspect of

your meditation rather than a distraction. When doing a week or more of this type of retreat, try to plan that you have two days off from work, just like in the real world. That way you will end up with two full days of solitary retreat per week.

The Buddha taught us to bring patience, generosity, and kindness into everything that we do. Observing such virtues during your work period will strengthen good habits and character, whether you are on or off the cushion, in or out of retreat. Setting our intention to do “retreat” creates a mindset of awareness and purpose in our daily activities and eliminates our daily excuses for why we can’t practice, showing us a way to a more settled mind as we go through our daily routines.

Below are some examples of what a working retreat might look like during a 24-hour time period. It doesn’t matter where you do it; you can be at home or in a retreat cabin. “Work” can mean anything from caring for your children when they are home (maybe you even have a newborn baby) to being in the office 8 hours a day. The principal idea is the same: Wake up earlier than you usually do, sit for as long as you can, go to work and practice with the intention that you have set for yourself, then come straight home after work and continue with your retreat schedule. Whatever your situation, set your intention that the day or days you have committed to are for “retreat” and for working on your choice of a virtue such as patience, generosity, or kindness. Remind yourself of that intention throughout the day and again before you fall asleep.

Besides keeping patience, generosity, and kindness in mind at all times, the most important thing is that you work diligently and as quietly as possible with an open, spacious mind. Use patience and generosity with kindness when dealing with others while you work. When you set your intention to be in retreat beforehand, everything you do when you are not sitting can be practice. If you notice agitation, remember your intention. If you see other emotions arising, remember your intention. If your retreat schedule gets off because something unexpected comes up and your work time is extended, just keep remembering your intention and get back to your cushion as soon as you can. However, make sure that these “unexpected things” are really important enough to interrupt your schedule. Something may seem important that can actually be done when the retreat is over. Sometimes it’s just another temptation to

break retreat with the neurotic idea of being “always busy.” It can wait. You are doing a retreat.

Set up your retreat schedule for a week, two weeks, five days, or a month, or whatever you choose, but choose to make a commitment to a certain length of time. Then stay with the length of the intended retreat and the retreat schedule as best you can.

Remembering your intention to be in retreat is like coming back to your breath in *shamatha* (calm abiding) meditation practice; it creates a habit of returning to practice even when you have not formally committed the time to meditating.

For any retreat, preparing ahead of time is important. Set up your shrine, a place within your retreat space where you can light a candle, offer incense, or display a photo of your teacher or someone (or something) that opens your heart. Clear your space so that you aren't distracted by disorganization. Arrange simple meals and have the food that you need on hand. You want your focus to be on meditation and working with your mind, not on the mundane tasks that usually keep us “busy.” Retreat time isn't the time for fasts or diets; however, it is an excellent time to eat healthy, simple food without alcohol, fast food, or sweets.

A Basic Retreat Guide If you have a meditation teacher, tell him or her about your plan for a working retreat and ask for reading material, a particular practice, and/or liturgies that you can use. If you haven't had meditation instruction, this may be the time to look for a reputable teacher or a seasoned practitioner to help you get started.

On the evening before your retreat, have a quiet period at your shrine. Kneeling in respect for all that brought you to this moment and all that is to come, take a few minutes to set your intention for the retreat: determine the qualities you would like to emphasize, and, if you choose, dedicate the merit of this retreat to a person or deity, to some worthy or needy group, or to the betterment of some particular situation. Then:

Sit for ten minutes. Before going to bed, read from something inspirational. You should bring this book with you on your workday retreat. Lights out.

Retreat schedule for an 8-hour workday Here is a basic guideline for a retreat during an 8-hour workday, one that would give you 4 hours of practice. Adjust it for

more or less sitting time to suit your work schedule, commuting time, and practice experience. You might also gradually increase your sitting time as the retreat progresses.

6:30 a.m. Arise. Your wake-up time should be as early as possible, but just be sure to decide ahead of time and then stick to the schedule for the duration of your retreat. Light your shrine and sit. Take a 2-minute break to stretch after 20 minutes if necessary. During this period you can also incorporate liturgy (prayers or sutras) or practices that your teacher suggested, or include a walking meditation.

7:30 Eat breakfast, dress, and go to work.

9:00 Start work, keeping to the guidelines of awareness discussed earlier. **1:00**
Lunch, followed by light exercise or a short reading.

2:00 Return to work.

5:00 Return to practice.

7:00 Read or study.

8:00 Have dinner and relax.

9:00 Return to practice.

10:00 Read briefly, relax, and go to sleep.

Retreat schedule for a short workday (3.5 hours)

6:00 a.m. Get out of bed as soon as you wake up, or as soon as the alarm rings. Light candles at your shrine, offer incense, and so on.

6:15 Before beginning sitting meditation practice, take time to settle on your cushion and recite any liturgy suggested by your teacher, or say a prayer or read an inspirational poem.

6:30 Meditation.

7:30 Light exercise. Breakfast.

8:30 Return to your cushion for sitting meditation; you can stand and stretch for 5 minutes every 20 minutes or so. If you are unaccustomed to sitting this long, break up the time by walking with simple awareness, alternating with stretching and sitting.

10:50 Break.

11:00 Read and contemplate on one of the books you have brought on retreat.

12 p.m. Lunch.

12:30 Start work.

4:00 Return to sitting meditation.

6:00 Dinner.

7:00 Sitting.

7:30 Read.

8:00 Sitting.

8:30 Recite out loud something you love to read, or something your teacher has recommended. Then sit.

9:00 Dedicate the merit of your practice, or take a moment for thoughtful appreciation of the opportunity to do this retreat. Then relax and go to bed.

Retreat for a Stay-at-Home Parent

5:30 a.m. Wake up as early as possible, but make sure you decide ahead of time when and then stick to the schedule for the duration of your retreat. Light your shrine and sit. Take a 2-minute break to stretch every 20 minutes if needed. Say liturgies, do

whatever practices your teacher has given you, and do walking meditation when appropriate.

6:30 Eat breakfast, dress. Practice until you have to start attending to your children. (Make your own time adjustment here.) Whatever you do with your children, stay with your intention to practice awareness, gentleness, and kindness. If they have an outside activity that doesn't require your presence, this is a good time to go back to your cushion for more meditation. You might also find a quiet place near their activity (if possible, out in nature) to meditate until you need to pick them up. Whenever they are asleep is a great time to do your meditation practice. When they are awake again, remember your intention to observe awareness, gentleness, and kindness until the next break. Once they are down for the night, you can return to sections of one of the schedules above.

Do you have a job with odd hours? No problem. Do you care for children, hold meetings or classes, want to schedule time for art or writing? No problem. The principal idea is the same. Wake up earlier, sit for as long as you can, do what you need or want to do while remembering your intention to practice awareness, patience, generosity, and kindness—then come straight home and return to your retreat schedule.

I hope that these suggestions will benefit you and all beings. Now there is no reason to not do retreat! After making retreat a habit, you may realize one day that you are living your life with less chaos and more as though you are on retreat all of the time.

For a dharmic person, good conduct is a sense of mindfulness and awareness: whatever you are doing, you should try to see it as an extension of your sitting practice, your general sense of awareness and your refraining from too much, unnecessary activity....You could look at yourself and smile. You could be awake and aware and, at the same time, on the spot. Constant sunrise happens. You reflect that yourself, and you always look awake and aware of what you are doing. That is good conduct. You respect yourself and you respect the sacredness of your whole being, your whole existence. When you have that kind of self-respect, you don't spill your tea or put your shoes on the wrong feet. You appreciate the weather, your coffee, your tea,

your clothes, your shower. There is a tremendous sense that for the first time you have become a real human being and you can actually appreciate the world around you. That appreciation comes from being aware. —Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, from *Seven Characteristics of a Dharmic Person*, The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa, vol. 2

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