

Karunakarma Series: Volume IV

# Commonsense Retreat

by

Tarchin Hearn

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*Karunakarma* means compassionate activity, the work of compassion, or compassion at work.

The Karunakarma Series is a collection of coil bound notes and articles that can be used for study or as teaching aids. Some of the series are available in e-book form from the Wangapeka website [[www.wangapeka.org](http://www.wangapeka.org)] or from [[www.greendharmatreasury.org](http://www.greendharmatreasury.org)]. May these writings water the seeds of wisdom and compassion for the benefit of all beings.

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## Commonsense Retreat

*Men seek retreats for themselves – in the country, by the sea, in the hills – and you yourself are particularly prone to this yearning. But all this is quite unphilosophic, when it is open to you, at any time you want, to retreat into yourself. No retreat offers someone more quiet and relaxation than that into his own mind, especially if he can dip into thoughts there which put him at immediate and complete ease: and by ease I simply mean a well ordered life. So constantly give yourself to this retreat and renew yourself. The doctrines you visit there should be few and fundamental, sufficient at one meeting to wash away all your pain and send you back free of resentment at what you must rejoin. – (from chapter 4 of ‘Meditations’ by Marcus Aurelius, Emperor of Rome, 121 – 180 AD)*

### HISTORY

‘COMMONSENSE RETREAT’ was first published June 1984, in response to a request from the Management Committee of the Wangapeka Study and Retreat Centre in New Zealand. At that time they wanted some written material to introduce people to the use of their solitary retreat cabins. It was hoped that these basic instructions would serve as a guide for modern day hermits as well as informing people who were simply curious. ‘What are they doing in those huts?’ Today there are vastly more teachers and many more published teachings than were available in 1984. In spite of this, requests for copies of the original Commonsense Retreat Booklet continue to arise. This e-book version of Commonsense Retreat was prepared in response to those requests.

The suggestions in this booklet are derived from Buddhist traditions of meditation that are 2500 years old and are offered for retreaters who are without personal instruction before or during their retreat. The topics are general in nature, in fact to some people – just commonsense, and though they have surely passed the test of time, they are not meant to be a substitute for specific, detailed instruction that can come through a personal trusting relationship, with an experienced living teacher.

Finally, I'd like to thank Bill Genat and Mary Jenkins for their thoughtful editing.

## BACKGROUND

RETREATS ARE AN OLD and venerable tradition. Throughout the course of human history, in many different cultures, they have been undertaken by both individuals and by groups. Generally, a retreat allows a person to temporarily get away from the daily routine of their life in order to engage more fully in an exploration of particular interest. People have retreated for a wide variety of purposes. It can be a time for study, for writing or for the creation of art. It may provide space for respite and healing. It may be part of a religious quest, an opportunity for contemplation, for vision, insight and deepening experience.

In the great traditions of meditation and contemplation, centuries of experience have led to an understanding of how best to approach and most fully utilize a retreat situation. In Buddhist traditions a practitioner would usually attend a number of group retreats during which, with the guidance of an experienced teacher, they would cultivate the skills needed for successful retreat work. In general, these basic retreat skills would be developed before any solitary work was attempted.

In schools of Tibetan Buddhism, a three year, three month and three day retreat (*three stars, three moons, three suns*) was, and still is, practiced. Traditionally, the meditators would be cloistered together with a teacher and during that time, in addition to following a rigorous schedule of meditation practice, they would receive a continual stream of practical guidance and instruction. At the conclusion, each yogi would then have the option of entering a solitary hermitage, going out into the community to teach, or repeating the three year retreat. One of my teachers, the Venerable Kalu Rinpoché, did three, three year retreats, back to back, before then going into many years of solitary practice!

In the Catholic Cistercian Order, a monk had to be over the age of 40 and well tested in the communal situation before he was permitted to become a hermit. Even then, a trial period for a few months was undertaken to make sure this vocation of solitary contemplation was right for him.

These traditional trainings helped to ensure that a yogi entered solitary retreat with clear aspiration and intent, with an eager if not joyous outlook on the opportunity, and with a degree of competence that would enable them to look after their physical, emotional and mental wellbeing. In essence, a practitioner needs to have a firm understanding of what they are undertaking. For most contemplative traditions this comes down to cultivating a continuity of presence, awareness and love.

## MOTIVATION

OVER THE YEARS, I have come across a wide range of motivations for going into retreat; some helpful and some less so.

Here are some less helpful ones:

Because someone said that it would be good for me.

Because my friends are doing it.

Because my friends will be impressed.

Because I'm angry or depressed about the world and want time out.

Because I'm having difficulties with inter-personal relationships and perhaps by going into retreat, I'll sort everything out and then, when I come out of retreat, all will be fine.

Because I'm in the grip of a medieval fantasy of leaving the messy world of human relationships in order to commune with a loving being or some form of pure spiritual energy on some other plane.

And here are some more helpful ones:

Because I have been cultivating mindfulness in daily life and would like an opportunity to deepen my practice.

Because I am beginning to sense how everything is interconnected and I would like an opportunity to explore this more thoroughly.

Because the quiet simplicity of being in a retreat situation can support a more refined exploration of the areas of living I am passionate about.

Because I value the opportunity to strengthen a continuity of loving attentiveness.

The motivation that carries you into retreat will powerfully influence the type and quality of experiences that occur. If your general attitude tends to be ego-centered and defensive, there is always a possibility of falling into negative brooding states, a cycle of struggles brought on by over expectation and dissatisfaction with your results. If, however, your life motivation is to grow and unfold through cultivating deeper understanding for the benefit of others and this motif of compassionate involvement and loving-kindness is central to your strivings, then you have the energy most conducive for successful retreat work. Be honest. If feelings of insecurity and self-concern are your primary motivations then this is probably not the time for solitary practice. Rather than retreating in isolation, you would benefit more from the support of wholesome friends and competent, loving, guidance.

Check your over-all feeling for the work. Do you see it as a time for advance, for new dimensions and discoveries or is it an attempt to escape? Of course, there is nothing wrong with escape. 'Wise is the being who runs away and lives to fight another day', or better still, 'lives to love another day'! But for retreats of more than two weeks duration this cannot be the prime motivation. What you probably need is not so much an escape from the difficulties of life but new refreshing experiences. Retreat is not a time for stewing in your problems.

So far we have considered our overall life motivation or attitude. Another aspect, however, is equally important. Many people seem to have the idea that it is enough just to *be* in retreat.

Unfortunately this is not the case. Retreat is a place to do work, to raise question and to explore. Are you clear about what you intend to do there?

Namgyal Rinpoché often said that good retreat work is actually advance work. Solitary retreat should have the feeling of a science laboratory, a place for methodical and systematic investigation; a place to peel away, with a modicum of loving detachment, the veils of partial views, hopes, fears and unclear thinking, in order to reveal the natural underlying state of health and inter-connectedness that is the foundation of all of us.

## PREPARATION

PREPARING FOR RETREAT requires a little common-sense. First of all you should be in a state of reasonably good health. How are your teeth? Before a long retreat, it might be a good idea to have a physical and dental check-up if you have any doubts.

Assuming that you are physically fit enough to function in the environment where you will retreat then take care of any outstanding business and social commitments that you may have. For example, if you intend to go into full retreat with no outside contact, it would be compassionate to let your friends know that you won't be reading, or responding to correspondence, during the retreat time. There's not much point sitting in your idyllic hermitage thinking, or even worse worrying, about things that you have neglected to tidy up. Try to fulfill any obligations before starting. In brief, do your best to ensure a physical and mental ambiance which gives you the greatest space and opportunity in which to unfold.

## ENVIRONMENT

IN MANY OF HIS TEACHINGS, the Buddha would urge people to, 'pay attention to detail'. This pithy advice has value in virtually any activity and especially in retreat. Try to take it to heart. Do what you can to arrange your environment so that every detail in it is resonating balance, harmony and uplifting inspiration.

On a daily basis your room should be swept clean and kept tidy. In general you'll probably benefit from a simple uncluttered space. If you do choose to have objects in the room, let them speak of beauty and integration. Many retreaters forget how powerfully the mind picks up subtle messages. A little dust, a pile of clothes, dirty pots. There is a basic law of mind that you tend to become what you meditate on. Cluttered environment supports a cluttered mind. Spacious environment supports a spacious mind. Pay heed to this. In addition to keeping your hut tidy, make sure there is lots of fresh air and during the day let the sunshine in. An environment that is clean, simple and natural will greatly support the unfolding of any positive exploration.

## PHYSICAL HEALTH

MEDITATORS, IN THE NAME of being 'spiritual', often neglect their bodies. Try to remember that everything that happens in your body is reflected in your mind and vice versa. In order to keep your body healthy and flexible, do some physical exercise each day. This could take the form of yoga or any other body awareness movement exploration. It could involve daily practicalities such as mindfully chopping wood, working in the garden or carrying water to your hut. A lot of unnecessary negativity arises through excessive physical inactivity. If you are retreating for an extended period it might be a good idea to break the routine once a week by taking a long walk. You'll find this change of environment very refreshing, especially if your practice is becoming a bit stale.

Caring for your body also extends to diet. If you are trying to impress your friends or your inner judge/critic as to what an accomplished ascetic you can be by fasting, not moving, and so on, you may as well forget about awakening. The path of awakening is ultimately a path of balance. The Buddha called it the 'Middle Way'. You are called to this work of growth and discovery and for that you need the support of a healthy, balanced diet.

Going into their first solitary retreat, many people come to the shocking realization that they are not very aware of what foods their body needs or even how much it needs. They may discover that, even as an adult, they are still eating what 'mommy' gave them or, on the other side of the same coin, they eat some extreme diet in reaction to mother's cooking. Are you balanced in this area?

Here are some basic guidelines for a good solitary retreat diet.

- (1) At the beginning, let your diet be similar to what you are generally used to, both in terms of content and in terms of how much you eat.
- (2) As the retreat progresses, if any changes must be made, make them gradually, so that the effect of this new diet doesn't dominate your experience.
- (3) Whenever possible, eat natural, unprocessed foods, fresh fruits, vegetables etc.
- (4) The question of whether or not to eat meat is a big consideration for some people. For many beings, a meatless diet tends to be a bit more supportive for deep meditation work. However, if you are used to meat in your daily diet and feel unsatisfied without it, then be sensible and eat some. The food you eat or don't eat is to aid your meditation, not to cause you difficulty.
- (5) Many meditators find it better to have their main meal at midday and eat just a light evening meal. This can help you be less drowsy as you meditate into the evening.
- (6) Since you are probably not getting the same amount of exercise that you are used to, it would be a good idea to eat foods that are easily digestible. This avoids backup in the system with accompanying gas and stomach pains. If you are sitting a lot it may be a good idea to go easy on beans and to make sure that things like brown rice, cauliflower, cabbage and so forth are well cooked. You will undoubtedly learn as you go.

In general have variety in your food. Be creative in your preparation; use both the cooking and the eating as a meditation. Above all, avoid obsessional extremes. A balanced and varied diet will support a balanced, interested state of mind.

## **THE ACTUAL WORK OR MEDITATION PRACTICE**

AN INTRODUCTORY BOOKLET such as this is not the place to give specific meditation instructions. However, the following hints will probably help, no matter what form of practice you are following.

When beginning a retreat it is wise to ease into meditation, gradually increasing the number of hours of formal meditation practice, a little each day, until you have reached your full discipline. Keep in mind that it usually takes a few days for the average meditator to settle into their practice. The less experienced meditator will probably take a bit longer.

It is helpful to begin each day by reflecting on your aspiration, your reason for being in retreat. In traditional Buddhism, this might take the form of contemplating refuge, the bodhisattva vow, the parts of the body, death and impermanence, and the four immeasurables (loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity). These contemplations can be found in my booklet “Daily Puja”. Whatever outer form these morning reflections take, the intent of them is to inspire a tone of exploration for the day; a calm clear mind of interest, suffused with loving-kindness, dedicated to the work of compassion.

At the conclusion of each day, a brief review may prove to be useful along with a conscious aspiring to share the wholesome energies of the day with all beings for the support of their growth and development.

In this day and age, the opportunity to do retreat work is increasingly rare and precious, so use your time to the full. Avoid unintentionally drifting into, verbalisation – speculative fantasy. Uncontrolled fantasy will inevitably lead you down the path of the five classical hindrances. First, desire for something other than what is happening sneaks into your experience. This almost always leads to some degree of frustration which then transforms into irritation and ill-will. The physical and mental tensions of ill-will use up much of your energy and gradually you sink into a state of lethargy and dullness. This can give way to an agitated state of restlessness and worry. In the end we come to a great swamp of skepticism and sometimes even depression. If you find any of these states occurring, gently bring your attentiveness to your breathing. Cut through negativity with the sword of interest-question. What is it? How does it arise? How does the universe, in all its wondrous complexity, give rise to all this!

Many people find it helpful to draw up a timetable of daily activities: this time, getting up; this time for formal meditation; this time, breakfast; this time, sitting; this time, walking; and so forth. Dividing the day into scheduled slots can help you to use your retreat time effectively, especially if you are not used to working on your own.

Throughout the day encourage a gentle attentiveness to your body, feelings, and mental states as well as to the phenomena arising on either the 'outer' or 'inner' planes. In Buddhist teachings these are called the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. Supported by these four, you cannot avoid wholesome growth. A common fault in retreat work lies in loosing the thread of mindfulness between meditation sessions. A session of mind-fulness followed by a session of mind-lessness is not the best use of retreat time. Try to remain clear and focused during all activities – cleaning, cooking, eating, toileting, moving from place to place and so on. Stop thinking about what you have done or experienced in the past. Abandon concern for what might arise in the future. Apply yourself with energy and diligence to fully experiencing the immediate moment.

## COMING OUT OF RETREAT

NOVICE MEDITATORS OFTEN waste a lot of time and energy thinking about coming out of meditation before the retreat is actually over. This is an unnecessary distraction. Thinking about what you will do when the retreat is over is just that – thinking. If this happens, acknowledge the thinking and then expand your appreciation to what is immediately occurring within and around you.

Just as you ideally entered retreat in an orderly and methodical fashion, increasing the hours of practice until the maximum was reached, so now, to end the retreat you should reduce your meditation by one hour each day, replacing the hour with creative work or physical labour until you are down to about three hours per day of formal meditation. At this point you might consider yourself as 'out' of retreat.

Generally, the longer you retreat, the longer you should take to withdraw. Gradually involve yourself in interaction with other people. Speak gently and not too much. Conserve your energies. Don't emerge from retreat to a wild binge. Remember balance! If your retreat has been in silence, begin to talk just a little bit, about necessities, not chit-chat. Then each day allow yourself more talking until you are comfortable with normal dialogue. You may be surprised at how much energy it takes to talk.

## SHARING THE MERIT

A WONDERFUL MEDITATION to end a retreat is called, in Buddhist practice, 'Sharing the Merit'. Throughout your retreat, you have been supported by countless beings whose coordinated

life efforts have made your retreat possible. As you come to its end, review your retreat, taking time to re-taste the various positive moments such as insights, understandings, healings, integratings; moments of discovery, of connection of love and gratitude. Then feel the presence of the people who built your hut and cared for the land, your parents and teachers, the birds, trees, insects, rain, sun and earth, that together have supported your good experience. Bring to mind your friends and your family, your work mates and home community. Feel the positive energy and aspirations generated in your retreat radiating into the lives of all these beings. This is a sharing of the merit.

Have a good retreat!

## **FURTHER RESOURCES**

The following writings by Tarchin are all available from [www.greendharmatreasury.org](http://www.greendharmatreasury.org)

*“Daily Puja”* (found in WRITINGS / E-BOOKS) – a collection of daily reflections or mini-contemplations taken from the Buddhist Tradition. They are presented in a way that will speak to the universal nature of everyone, regardless of their religious beliefs.

*“Foundations of Mindfulness; a manual for meditators”* (found in WRITINGS / E-BOOKS) summarizes the Buddha’s classical teaching on the four foundations of mindfulness.

*“Silence and Retreat”* (found in WRITINGS / MISCELLANY - SHORT PIECES) a thoughtful essay that arose in response to the question of whether or not a retreat would be held in silence.