

The Value of Retreat

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In the world in which we live, there are many different people with many different ideas, religions, and philosophies. But one thing that is clear is that everyone wishes to be free from suffering and to achieve happiness. Everyone is trying his or her best for the sake of happiness. Toward this end we have made a lot of material progress, and of course material approaches can give us some comfort. However, we cannot achieve real peace and happiness this way, no matter how advanced our powers are in a technologically developed society. The only way to reach real peace and happiness is through spiritual practice. That is why there are so many people all over the world who are now interested in a spiritual path, and especially in Buddhism – in particular, in Tibetan Buddhism.

The purpose of receiving teachings and empowerments is to practice them. If you do not cultivate the teachings and empowerments through practice, but only hear them and learn about them, then this will not fulfill your wish. Once you receive teachings, you must practice them. You can do this anywhere, including in your own home. However, for a beginner, this can be difficult. The world has many distractions and we lead such busy lives with our families, commitments, and so on. This is why it becomes important to perform retreats. When you do a retreat, you are removed from the distracting world, in a secluded place with no noise and no worldly activity, so that your mind can be focused and calm. In this situation, the practices that you do – recitations, meditations, and visualizations – will be much more effective.

Once you have done the retreat and it is effective, once you have built a sound base, then you can continue your practice anywhere on a daily basis. This is why doing a retreat is very important. It is also important to do it soon, for as the Buddha said, everything is impermanent. In particular, our human life has no definite span. Anything can happen, but one thing that is one

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hundred percent certain, so that there is no doubt about this whatsoever, is that anyone who is born in this universe is going to die. Death will come sooner or later, and nobody can determine when it will come. It could come today, tonight, tomorrow, at any time. Many people think, "I am young, I have time, and I am healthy, so at the moment I'll just enjoy the world and then later I will practice." This is totally wrong. Whether you will really have such a chance or not is very difficult to say. Therefore, it is very important to undertake serious practice straight away.

It is possible to do a retreat on your own, but as individuals, this is difficult. You need a conducive place, and you need a retreat manual, and you need offerings to set up, and you need instructions, etc. For all of these conditions to come together is difficult and very rare. But in an organized retreat, we try our best to create these conditions so that retreatants will not have problems with their shrines or with setting up their offerings, so that they will have an appropriate place and the texts that they require, and so that the right rituals can be performed.

In the beginning, your instructor will give the teachings so that you will possess full knowledge.

During the retreat, from time to time, someone will give supplementary instructions. At the end of the retreat, when you are required to perform a fire puja and the like, the retreat organizers will arrange it so that you will not need to worry about everything by yourself. For individuals on their own to try to get this text from here and that text from somewhere else can be very difficult. We have a number of people who come to India wanting to do a retreat, and the initial hurdles of where to do it and how to get all of the texts can be very difficult.

I and many other masters of our tradition have given a number of teachings, especially the Lam Dre, in many places, so that now there are many people who have received the full Lam Dre teachings and empowerments and who need to practice them. This is the reason we organize retreats. As I said, the purpose of receiving the Lam Dre is to practice it.

And that is also why we have specifically chosen the Hevajra practice for this retreat. Of course, one can practice any deity, but Hevajra is the principal deity of our tradition, and it has the most exclusive and elaborate teachings. Having done the Hevajra retreat, you will have a very

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clear idea of how to practice other deities as well. Therefore we have chosen Hevajra.

Some people are concerned that whereas the Mahayana emphasizes the commitment to help sentient beings, retreat means that you are renouncing the world. Indeed, it is true that every Mahayana practice is not for your own sake but for the sake of all other sentient beings. It is important to engage in activities that help sentient beings. But at the moment we ordinary people. We do not have the ability to really help all sentient beings. We do not have the knowledge and we do not have full power to help all beings, so first we have to cultivate within ourselves the power and ability to help.

Therefore, you need to do retreat. You cannot do this simply by practicing a few sadhanas here and there in your busy world full of distractions. But if you do a retreat, even if it is only for a few months, then you will have a good foundation. The best retreat is one that is based on experiencing certain signs and realizations. But if you cannot do a sign retreat, then you can at least do a timed retreat or a number-of-mantras retreat. If you can do that, then you will have a foundation, some kind of power or strength, that

you can then use to help beings. Otherwise, without any abilities, how can you help other sentient beings? Therefore, doing retreat is very important for your own sake as well as the sake of others.

Retreat, as it is traditionally mentioned in the tantras and also in the commentaries, means that you are completely away from the busy world. There should be outer boundaries, inner boundaries, and innermost boundaries. You do not go out, and only certain people are allowed to come in. Other than these individuals, there is absolutely no link between the outside world and yourself. Physically, you should not be seen and you should not see other people. If you see other people, this is called “making holes” because such contact punctures the boundaries of the retreat. And if other people see you, this is called “tearing” because such incidents mar the retreat. Even if you do see outsiders, they should not hear your voice, and, ideally, seeing them should not disturb your mind, either. That is difficult, but you should try to concentrate on your practice as much as possible. Up until now, we have done a number of organized teachings, but so far we have not done any organized retreats in our

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tradition. Therefore, to benefit people all over the world who have received the teachings, especially the Lam Dre teaching, we are now organizing retreat programs.



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