

## RETREAT REFLECTIONS

### from our June Retreat 2005 in Temecula, California

I reluctantly attended the retreat. A couple of weeks before the retreat, I decided that it would be more "fun" to visit a friend in Seattle. After a few days of contemplating "flaking out" of the retreat, I decided that although the retreat probably wouldn't be "fun", it would provide me with a spiritual growth opportunity.

During the retreat, I did my best to surrender and open myself to whatever came up. I was feeling somber, but not particularly sad when I had my first interview with Victor. I almost immediately started to cry. This was surprising to me because I just didn't feel sad really. I felt quiet, and calm. It became apparent that I was deeply dissatisfied with my current method of earning a living and yearned to do something more personally meaningful. I was somewhat surprised at the depth of my disappointment and sadness about this. The peace, quiet, and focus on introspection while somewhat challenging also gave me the opportunity to touch the spirit living inside my skin. This spirit wants more than money, achievements, attractiveness and other outer expressions. This spirit is moving me in a new somewhat scary direction, but I am choosing to honor her.

Where all this ends up is unknown. There are many obstacles in my path, but I will take a step at a time and see where I end up. At least I'm pointed in a direction. (Ellen)

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The drive to Vina de Lestonnac was quite exhilarating. I managed to run head on into rush hour traffic and watched as the cars who had toll road passes sped by; my journey turned into a three and a half hour ordeal including a breakdown in which my old beater car filled up with smoke. I limped off the freeway to a Jack in the Box and one cheeseburger later got back in my car hoping it would make the rest of the journey. It did. The home stretch after turning off on Adams Road was most interesting, observing the wineries and countryside as the dusk set in, while trying to be mindful of locating Vina de Lestonnac, which ended up to be quite easy, the center being clearly marked by a crucifix on the rooftop, which was quite captivating. Hats off to Cali for her excellent directions! I was impressed at what a fine place this looked for a retreat.

Although I was just a "weekender" a number of things stand out about the practice of retreat. The following I feel are worthy of comment: the work off the cushions, the momentum of the frequent sittings, the dharma talks, the support of sitting with others on retreat, and the huge letdown I felt when the retreat was over. Before I first attended our Vipassana group, I was involved in zen. In zen there is a term "joriki" which means the power, or momentum built up by repeated sittings. I have done all day sits before, but this was the longest period of repeated sitting I have done to date. It has been easy for me to allow

the power of a sit to dissipate before the next sit, but I found when the next sit is so close in time, I carried over some of the benefit into the next sit.

It was the second sitting on the second day that I felt the effect of the successive sittings on my brain. I have been under intense grief due to the recent loss of my father, suffering physically from recent surgery and under great stress due to threatened litigation against my dad's trust. To expect any relief from mindfulness brought about a considerable degree of relief from these issues. At least I knew for sure they eat away at me. I was never able to come close to letting go of these issues completely, that will take a lot more work, but the retreat speeded up the process noticeably. At one point I considered leaving, but I reasoned that if practice had any value at all it was in confronting yourself and whatever issues you face, otherwise what is the use? The momentum of continued mindfulness did seem to cut through my very worried mental state.

Alternating sitting with mindfulness walks and mindfulness eating (which I did plenty of), did merge the off the cushion effort with the sitting effort, resulting in a higher level of overall mindfulness. Not having to be concerned with what to say, or how to smile to others reduces unnecessary distractions to mindfulness. Ultimately I can see how this process dissolves delusion (self) and results in the awakening to our underlying true nature. I seemed to slow down enough to observe the interesting patterns on the lizard's skin, the mist dissolving over a distant peak, the purple flowers at the top of the hill and the wafting clouds. There seemed to be no little man inside conducting the chewing of my food and I seemed keenly aware of the movement of my legs. Mindfulness as a cutting tool of self became somewhat self-evident. (Anonymous)

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(Of course I'd like to edit, rewrite and attempt a literary coup. I know the grammar is off but these were impressions at the time .So this is it for now.)

6/10 Silent Retreat.

Retreat began Monday a.m. I arrived Thursday evening bring the clanging of the city and my nerves. Restless sleep. Skipped the first meditation. Scared? Of my own insides? I have cheated so much. Afraid I can't do this.

Breakfast. Choose eggs with ham because I didn't want "them" to feel bad about making too much of that and not enough of plain eggs. AAAAAAgh!!!! Patterns already. Select a chair facing the room to check out the people. Most people facing the window. Victor faced the wall.

2nd sit. Total presence the goal. Me---physical discomfort. Not ok to move, adjust, wiggle or squirm! Impossible. Thinking, thinking, thinking.

#3 after lunch. Still fighting, resisting. Body pain. Thinking again. Anger.

#4 I managed because VB talked during part of it.

Walk, Sit, Yoga. It feels good to move. A big part of me wants to do nothing or

sit, eat, watch TV, go home. Want terribly to make a cell phone call. Why? Comfort of the old routine? I resist. Body still tired. Hasn't slowed down very much. Could sleep again right now. "Life is a mystery to be lived. Ego thinks it's a puzzle to be solved."

Sat. Second day. Small shifts down to more calm.

Dharma insights.

5 hindrances. Greed hatred/aversion restlessness sloth doubt. They're hard wired in the system. Must slow down to can catch them. Otherwise go into default position, i.e. same old patterns. I knew this years ago but thought there was a cure.

Vipassana is following the brain. When the brain is distracted make that topic the focus. So far I've gotten fear, jealousy, envy, desire, wanting, longing. If I stay there I become hysterical. When I go to Metta I calm down and usually back to the breath. Western psychology is about improving the story, having a better dream on a daily basis. We live out the story robotically. A Paradigm shift wakes us up from the dream.

Thoughts after the weekend.

It's very hard to settle down. Just as I feared. My mind is out of control. Relentlessly grabbing, directing, seducing and chattering without breath or rest. It's a fight to the death. I crave the setting of the retreat. At least it's only my mind that is crazed. At home it's everything. I experience too much stimulation no matter what. But when I have the opportunity for quiet I turn on the radio. I give in to sound battering.

It was just as hard there. But the single mindedness, the commitment and dedication of others reinforced my desire and my willingness to endure. Wish I could have been there for the whole week. I wonder of course how it would have been different, and I indulge in fantasies of "it would have been 'better.'" Isn't that a seduction?! I couldn't take advantage of what was because.....

Actually, I did take advantage as much as I could. And that is what I am doing now. VB pointed out that meditation takes a proactive approach. Actually, just like any other skill one wants to learn. You find a teacher -class, book, program; you make a plan to enact it, and then you discipline yourself to follow it. No matter what, come hell or high water, whatever it costs, nose to the grindstone, single-mindedness, devotion, desire. Any or all of the things that motivate us to stay on the path, especially when it's difficult.

It helps me to think of the ego as "other", not me, not my identity, more like a spoiled child who will do anything to get her way. And oh she is so clever, sneaky, manipulative and, at this point, so powerful. I'd like chop her out. Unfortunately I have to be more subtle, gentler. But I also have to firm up my discipline and determination.

It was wonderful to have such a comfortable, beautiful room, dedicated to quiet, contemplation and prayer; a place with few distractions, apart from daily life. You didn't have to reestablish the energy from the ground up each and every time. The group became so important. Other people seeking the same thing and maybe reaching it gave me motivation to continue. (Karene)

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Tuesday

All this "rushing" from thought to thought, piling on the "things to do," the "projects to plan," -- all this is suffering and greed, too. What is underlying this *futurizing* is the fundamental dissatisfaction that THIS MOMENT IS NOT ENOUGH "AS IS." As if the next one will be? And forever after that? AS IF? All experiences ring with the hollow bells of dissatisfaction. At the core of every experience is impermanence, suffering and complete non-existence of a personal self. And I am trying to find what does not exist--permanence and satisfaction--in each new experience that happens to ME. Talk about being lost in the 'chase-the-tail game' of the rooster, the pig and the snake. Round and round and round. Greed is wanting more, because it is dissatisfied with right now. This is not living!

Is restless mind the essence of who I am? Is my true nature sleepy? Or angry? Or afraid? Or lonely? My true nature is none of that. It is space, itself, which contains all and everything, but is NOT those things. Can I rest in essence more and whirl in the content less?

When there is nothing else to be done, or thought to be thought, the only choice is to surrender to "what is." Victor talked about this with regards to his forgetting to bring his address book and the ensuing drama of not being able to call people. There was nothing he could do about the situation. He wasn't going to drive back to Long Beach. He could only surrender to "what is," and *be* with that truth. Be with the emotions and stories that are rising. Not push them away, not wish them away. BE with the truth and it will move. It will change. Everything does.

Wednesday

NO NAME. NO STORY.

How would I live moment to moment, with no name and no story? At least with the conviction, the certainty that I AM NOT my name, nor story? It's feels a little like stepping over a cliff.

Thursday

The ideas fly into the mind (during sits, when it is especially noticeable), but what causes enormous suffering and energy drain is not the flash of ideas, but

rather my trying to **hold onto them**. Trying to hold on is symptomatic of NOT TRUSTING the moment to support itself. Moment to moment to moment. Is it not enough to rest in this moment? To remember that **THIS IS IT!**

I discuss this in my teacher interview Thursday night. Victor points out, as Krishnamurti contends, that letting go of the ideas that bling bling in this moment may not mean *losing* them at all. Rather, letting them be (which I like better than “letting them go”) allows them to ripen—to get (dare I say) better, deeper. Like a strawberry, when it is ripe, it drops to the ground, and then it’s mine to pick up and eat.

So, I don’t trust the moment and am so afraid, catastrophizing all over the place...with this deeply grooved conditioning that “it’s my fault.” As I write this on Friday morning (having slept on it...so to speak), I see how this default soaks into my life and keeps me consistently off balance and morbidly afraid.

Listen, nothing is my fault. Think of the numberless conditions that must converge and meld at this very moment to create this moment, with me in it. I am merely part of the web of life that undulates and stretches through infinity. To think I am to blame is the work of a conditioned ego.

Life happens and all things work out, because nothing lasts. This too, the joy and the sorrow, will pass. Always does. It’s nature and it’s natural. The story of existence is *conflict and resolution; conflict and resolution, conflict and resolution*, expressed in infinite ways and described in numberless “stories.”

Friday

Continuing this discussion, I feel so responsible for everything and therefore, the go-to girl to blame when things don’t go well, or as planned. But, I am breathed and lived, like everyone else. My “responsibility” is to remain steadfastly true to this moment as the joyful and empty participant in the dance—embracing it with a full heart and NO NAME.

Anything—words, thoughts, emotions—that are planned out or rehearsed are dead. They are dead because their relevance is only to that moment in which they arise.

Victor’s talks sparkle and are palpable in the way they touch the heart because they are the manifestation of *beingness* and not *doingness*. More and more, Victor resides in the presence of the present when he gives dharma talks. It’s remarkable and wonderful and rare to be around energy that is utterly spontaneous and present.

In meditation, I am dealing with a wall of “I” thoughts. A damned solid wall and the only way to cut through is to pull it out by the root. Nipping a stem here or there is a quick (and temporary) fix. My practice teaches that extracting the root

means to be completely with what's happening, with *what is*. And, taking the extra step to ask "who" is experiencing this anyway. The body and mind react (or hopefully respond) to "what is." There is a negative, positive or neutral feeling and the story. The story. And *who* is this story happening to? *Who* is telling the story?

The only way to evoke change / movement (which is inevitable anyway) is to move toward and embrace *what is*, to be with it, stay with it. That's it.

THINKING IS RESISTENCE TO "WHAT IS." Thinking is "not being present."

Life is a mystery to be lived, not solved. So wouldn't I need to nurture some equanimity with *not knowing*, with uncertainty. What would happen if I suspend the need to know what will happen tomorrow? Isn't this moment enough? Needing guarantees in this life is the sure path to suffering.

Saturday

What to do, what to do? This dharma stuff, it's a *feeling*. It's not intellectual weight lifting. This "no name, no body" is a feeling. Can I pay attention to "what is" as if it has nothing to do with little me? This whole world is fabricated anyway. Wall-to-wall ego. All fabrication. KFUK--all stories, all the time—that's the radio station playing in my head.

Even politics, ecology, global warming, terrorists, difficult mother, me—all stories / all fiction!!!!!! As I dinged the bell, calling the retreatants for the last sit of the night, I noted the objects before me: The trash can, the miniature statue of Mary, the fountain and doors, the stairs, the sky above, the cement walkway. I gave them names. Names I learned a long time ago. It's the way the mind works, so I will recognize the objects in my world, so the illusion of order is maintained in a reality that is not as it seems. The mind makes order out of chaos.

As soon as I name something, the stories arise too—whether explicit or implicit. There it is. It's my point of view and I have immediately limited that object by naming it and giving it a story. By nature a story limits and cannot possibly include the fullness of existence within it—and that includes the story I tell myself *about myself*. The story may seem real, relatively, but it is so limited as to render it fiction, even within the relative realm of this illusion.

I am lost inside this whirling amusement park ride of stories. Even the story I tell my self about global warming is limited and one sided. What would Mother Earth say on the same topic? "I get a little hot. I get a little cold. I get bashed by a giant meteor. I get a little hot. I get a little cold..."

The stories are entirely self-referential and based on a self that is sharply divided inside and ultimately non-existent. And this is what our world is built upon. Oh my...

Sunday

Victor didn't tape his last dharma talk of the retreat, so I took these notes. The subject is "Going Home."

Every moment I AM HOME. So all this running around smartly to get where? I can use this wonderful mind that dwells in imagination, and channel the energy inward. All that is needed is available now. Why beat it because the mind is drawn to stories. Love it.

Anyway, "whose" mind IS whirling? Shift the focus from the *what* to the *who*. From object to subject. Objects are numberless, but there is only one subject.

It is a *wordless feeling*—an attitude of accepting deeply what I am in this moment. I CANNOT CHANGE WHAT I CANNOT EMBRACE. That means right now, right here.

We have the capacity to embrace our muck and our glory this very moment.

**WHERE I AM AND WHAT I AM THIS MOMENT IS GOOD ENOUGH.**  
Enlightenment is out of my control. Life is out of my control. As if, if I do one more thing, read one more book, do one more sit, I'll get it. What a waste of time.

**TRUE ENLIGHTENMENT IS THE CAPACITY TO BE WITH WORLD, TO BE WITH THE WORLD OF DELUSION, BUT NOT CAUGHT BY IT.**

The problem with being in the world is that we get confused and think we ARE part of the muck.

The world is bigger and more powerful than us and we must have our spiritual friends.

The part of me that wants to go to sleep will find the distractions, for sure. Do I want to go to sleep? Or, do I want to wake up from the dream? If I truly want to wake up, then I must be pro-active and go home with an intention to maintain my practice.

Victor implores us to find people who have some element of silence inside. If they don't, then they don't have anything to teach.

There is a breath body that reacts to good vibes. We need those beings that have a vibration that will resonate and sync with yours and raise it because that is what we are—vibration. And that is the same thing as being with a spiritual community.

Don't give up. Believe in my capacity to create something wonderful. Everything blooms from within of self-blessing. The flowering comes from within, but there has to be sunlight, water, nurturing. It has to be in a garden. The sangha is a

garden.

Personal notes:

The ability to dance upon and embrace the truth that "I shall die," is a great gift.

This moment is it. And the next moment *is it*. Nothing else is "it," but this very moment, for better, or worse.

Movement is an illusion in consciousness. There appears to be movement all over the place, but it's "appearing" within utter stillness. In the same way, I sit still in a moving car, or lay still on my bed at night, while the earth, the solar system and the Milky Way Galaxy are racing through space at breakneck speed.

All movement is in mind. It is as if all the manifestation of emptiness rises, moves and falls away again within this very still container of nothing.

**Let go of BEFORE AND AFTER..** Victor says he is practicing this more and more in his sits. What a way to bring the attention and concentration to right now. After all, right now is bigger than before or after. It is completely full. (CR)

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The depth of Victor's insight was evident in his Dharma talks. It was refreshing to hear him talk uninterrupted, the rest of us having to be silent as opposed to the dharma talks in Long Beach where we all contribute our two cents worth. An analogy I have heard somewhere is that a sitting group is like a group of people lost in the desert without water. Someone has to set out to find water or the group will die of thirst. The others have to wait and preserve their energy till the water seeker returns with the (living) waters. Victor is our water seeker. He sets out to dharma retreats to bring back the living water of the dharma to us. He sets out across the desert to three retreats in the last year. The living water he brought back to our group quenched my dharma thirst like spring water tinkling from mountain rocks. A person is lucky to come across one genuine teacher in a lifetime and should take advantage of such an auspicious opportunity.

At the end of the retreat I felt a tremendous letdown. The tiny glimpse of mindfulness derived from the retreat made the enormity of the task we face in getting off the wheel of ignorance, seem so insurmountable. Life passes so quickly, and the stumbling blocks are so large. To paraphrase one of the retreatants, when faced with this battle it would be easy to give in and just lay down forever. The choice is either that, or to arouse our spirits and continue the crossing to the other shore. (Anonymous)