

A Brief Guide for Solitary Retreat in the Zen Tradition

by Kōkyō Henkel, 2021

“All of humanity’s problems stem from the inability to sit quietly in a room alone.”
(17th century French philosopher Blaise Pascal)

The word “retreat” could be used to translate the Sanskrit term *varṣa* (three-month rainy season retreat originating in Buddha’s time), the Japanese terms *ango* (安居 *peaceful dwelling*; three-month Zen retreat in China and Japan), *kessei* (結制 *establishing a boundary/restraint*; another name for *ango*), *doku-sesshin* (獨攝心 *solitary gathering of mind*; maybe the most appropriate term for solitary Zen retreat) and the Tibetan term *tsam* (*boundary*). The following guidelines could apply to a retreat of any length, which commonly is: 1 day, 3 days, 5 days, 7 days, 10 days, 21 days, 30 days, 90 days, 100 days, 1 year, 3 years, up to an entire lifetime. Menzan Zenji (1683–1769), an important Sōtō Zen teacher and reformer, did a 1000-day retreat (mostly alone), sitting zazen alternating with studying Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō. The essential elements that make up a meditation retreat of any kind include daily schedule, physical boundaries, silence, and simplicity. Retreat could be understood as having three aspects: outer, inner, and innermost. Outer retreat is defined by the guidelines in this essay, inner retreat is keeping whatever precepts one holds and not straying into distracted thoughts of past and future, and innermost retreat is peacefully abiding in the empty luminous nature of mind – unimpeded, nondual with all experiences, and infused with compassion for all beings. I consider the 30-day solo retreats I have done to have been the most transformative events in my practice life.

Daily Schedule

Setting up and keeping a daily practice schedule is the foundation of any retreat. Traditionally in China, Korea, Japan, and Tibet, a daily schedule consists of four sessions of formal practice “on the cushion” – usually interspersed with three meals (breakfast, lunch, and smaller evening snack or tea). Practicing alone, nobody else will know if one keeps to the schedule – this may be especially beneficial for those who are used to practicing in group retreats. It is very helpful for developing self-discipline and self-honesty, without relying on the peer-pressure of “others” to help one follow the schedule. For a longer retreat (longer than 21 days), one may use a modified schedule one day a week, including more “free” time or later wake-up time. I have done 100-day retreat without a modified weekly day, so as to keep the momentum of focused presence.

A sample schedule, approximately what I generally follow (~ten 40-minute periods), is below. For a shorter retreat (1-10 days), one could add a period in the early morning and late evening to make twelve periods. 40-minute zazen periods is standard in the Japanese Sōtō Zen tradition, and ~25 minutes in the Rinzai Zen tradition. This schedule has 2 or 3-hour breaks between sessions, which is quite long even after cooking, eating, cleaning, and exercising – which may be especially appropriate for a longer retreat. Naturally, a shorter retreat (1-10 days) could have shorter breaks than a longer retreat. In a traditional 3-year solitary (or group) retreat in all Tibetan lineages, the standard daily schedule is four 3-hour formal practice sessions (with no “days off”) – quite a high standard. My Dzogchen teacher Tsoknyi Rinpoche recommends one full retreat day every week, if possible, for all his students – with 1.5 or 2-hour sessions in early morning and evening, 2 or 3-hour sessions in late morning and afternoon. If one also practices Vajrayana, then mantra recitation, etc., could take the place of some zazen periods. Dharma study is often discouraged during shorter Zen retreats, in order to give up all kinds of discursive mental activity, but this is an option depending on personal preference, especially for longer retreats. My practice has been greatly benefitted by Dharma study during retreats – to clarify meditation methods I may be working on, for inspiration (without a usual sesshin Dharma talk), and to keep returning the mind to Dharma instead of worldly concerns. For retreat reading, it’s important to choose a text(s) that relate to actual experiential practice on retreat, as opposed to Buddhist history, how to get along with others (who aren’t around), etc. Life stories of the ancient masters is a traditional type of retreat reading in the Tibetan tradition. Meditation manuals and more challenging texts, that we don’t have the time or concentration to focus on outside of retreat, can be a great enhancement to retreat. In modern times, this study time could also include listening to recordings of talks by one’s teachers.

4:20am	Wake up, make offerings to Buddha, yogasana and pranayama	(it's essential to have a meditation timer so as to not look at a clock. There are many free timer apps.)
5:00	Zazen	
5:40	Kinhin (walking meditation)	
5:50	Zazen	
6:30	Morning Service (such as: Heart Sutra & Zen Ancestor Poems, Dedicated to Names of Ancestors)	
7:00	Breakfast, rest/exercise/study	
10:00	Zazen	
10:40	Kinhin	
10:50	Zazen	
11:30	Kinhin	
11:40	Zazen	
12:20	Lunch, rest/exercise/study	
3:30pm	Zazen	
4:10	Kinhin	
4:20	Zazen	
5:00	Kinhin	
5:10	Zazen	
5:50	Evening Service (such as: Daihi Shin Darani and Dedication of Merit)	
6:00	Supper, rest/exercise/study	
8:00	Zazen	
8:40	Kinhin	
8:50	Zazen	
9:30	Three Prostrations, sleep	

Physical Boundaries

It is traditional in Buddhist retreats to set up a physical boundary, even doing a ceremony at the beginning and end of a longer retreat to make offerings to the Dharma Protectors in the four directions that surround the boundary. Before beginning retreat it's important to decide how far one can walk in any direction from one's retreat room. This could be anywhere from a 30' x 30' square, to a square mile if one is in the wilderness and won't run into other people. I once did a 30-day retreat with a ~30' x 150' foot boundary, which allowed room for fast-walking but created a very focused container (without seeing any others during this time). For a retreat longer than 21 days, it may be necessary to leave the designated boundary to replenish food supplies (though with root vegetables and/or frozen vegetables one might extend the time inside the boundary to 60 days or longer; I have done this for up to 30 days). Also, especially if one is in a retreat center set up for solo retreat (of which there are many in America), there may be people available to bring food upon request and leave it where you can pick it up inside the boundary. If one does need to leave, it is good to consider how to make it a short focused trip with as little talking or interacting as possible, to keep the spirit of retreat.

Silence

Silence is a key aspect of any retreat. Ideally one is in a silent environment, but even more important is to refrain from talking with others. If communication is necessary, it could be limited to a certain time of the day, or using note-writing. Since writing takes longer than speaking, it tends to limit conversation to its essentials. One might try an "almost solo" retreat with a partner or friend, which I have done with my wife.

Simplicity

Simplicity means to limit usual activities that tend to pull awareness out of spacious presence into narrow focus on objects and old habits. These activities include watching TV or movies, using the internet, engaging in email and social media, etc. It's very helpful to turn on email "vacation setting" when on retreat. To save time when cooking meals, an electric rice cooker is helpful, since one can turn it on during kinhin and then forget about it. In Zen monasteries it is traditional to cook a little extra lunch (the main meal) and just heat up the leftovers for the evening "medicinal" snack/meal. This also minimizes cooking time in a solo retreat.