

## Reflective Meditation Retreats

*“Insight meditation practised in reflective mode is a quintessential dharma practice. Moreover, our culture of awakening depends on the communal nature of our practice, and both of them depend on our absorbing the dharma as a vital resource in our practice.”*

[Winton Higgins: the dharmic foundations of the reflective meditation approach](#)

Our retreats have become gentler and more responsive over the years; informed by our study of the Dharma and power dynamics within Buddhist sanghas. We believe that retreats have the responsibility to foster each person's meditation practice, and to hold space for independent and critical thinking.

Having done hundreds of retreats between us, we know that while retreats benefit our meditation practice they also have costs. Residential retreats are expensive with retreat center fees, meals, travel and time off work. Other costs may include forgoing time with family and friends, finding pet care, or giving up a well-earned vacation in order to dedicate time for practice. Signing up for a retreat is a big decision.

So, it is not surprising when meditators sign up they are excited about having time off, time for self-discovery, for freedom from mundane responsibilities and then when the time comes to go to the retreat, they may be flooded with all the anxieties, bordering on dread, of the very same things!

To structure a welcoming, contained, and in-depth retreat environment is a unique challenge. So, we try to implement what we have learned from our experience.

**Our aim** is for the middle path between a strict adherence to an intensive schedule and completely doing away with the structures and guidelines that have been considered worthwhile on Vipassana retreats. This direction parallels the ways our meditation and reflection practice has evolved:

1. All the retreat centers we use are contemplative, with beautiful grounds that support us in nature and quietude. Our retreats are small and intimate, most have between 10-25 participants with one or two teachers, and ideally with each person in a private room. Because of the relational aspect of Reflective Meditation having a private room allows each person to have independent space away from others and the world we are co-creating on retreat.
2. We provide time for silence on our retreats. We find this a necessary and important component of developing a meditation practice and receptive listening - the ability to listen to ourselves and our inner world, while paying attention to others, and our external world.

Within silence opportunities for dialogue with the teachers and with other participants are vital. We offer the opportunity to meet in small reflection groups where each person has a chance to share, if they would like. Additionally, participants have a choice to meet with other retreatants in a dyad to talk about the topics emerging on the retreat. In these ways, the participants can learn from many people.

In addition to meditation sittings, we incorporate other ways of teaching and reflective practices so that meditators gently visit and revisit their beliefs and views.

Team-teaching has been our creative way to respond to the inherent power of the sole dharma teacher, and the more subtle and obvious abuses of power within sanghas. By bringing in diverse voices, the teachings are not given in a uniform or prescriptive fashion. We value creativity and innovation, which makes room for people to have different experience and views of practice.

We are careful in how we present the Dharma teachings. We now lean toward offering reflective conversations rather than lectures. We have added in free form writing sessions after a dharma prompt, and reflective noting (journaling brief notes *during* a meditation sitting). All of these have emerged from our trial and error process over the years. It is important to note that this gentler way of retreating has come from us challenging the “rules” of the right way to meditate, the right way to go on retreat, the right way to awaken.

3. Let us say a few words about how we schedule time on our retreats. We know that flexibility and choice are two important aspects of keeping the retreat “trauma sensitive”. There is free time to exercise, walk, and read. An atmosphere of permission allows for ease and the dharma to naturally unfold; for each participant to discover their own path.
4. Because not everyone is able to get away from their life to attend a residential retreat, we have also been offering non-residential retreats in Portland, Oregon, online retreats via Zoom for up to five days, as well as one-day retreats in San Diego and San Luis Obispo, California. All keep a similar schedule.

We will leave you with some comments from retreatants:

"Thanks to this gentle and spacious orientation to meditation, I had time to really pause, feel my vulnerability, as well as take in the good. It takes guts to be gentle!"

Another added: "I loved the talks and conversations! They were excellent, insightful and not overly complicated but enabled deep contemplation."

From our recent online retreat: "Journaling and sharing my thoughts has been a challenge for me in the past. On this retreat, though, I found it surprisingly easy to share with the group. Not quite sure why, though...perhaps feeling safe and secure in my home, and thus more willing to be open...? For whatever reason, this online format really worked well for me."

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