

musings on **Retreat**

There is a natural way of retreat. Similar to, but not quite vacation, sabbatical or time off. When allowed there appears a rhythm, subtle - easily missed in a busy or over-scheduled life. Rhythm... ebb and flow.

The dedicated time and space of retreat allows an opportunity to see, feel, and listen to this subtle rhythm, as it may appear in 10,000 ways.

Over the last two decades I've explored many forms of retreat. Traveling far - Thailand, New York, California - and also staying right at home. Sometimes retreats are deep in the forest, hills, mountains; other times they are in the center of a big city. I've been in retreats with several hundred people, 50, 20, 10 and just me. Some have been in silence; some in darkness. Retreats can come in many flavors, styles and sizes.

Planning

A few months ago I found myself beginning to plan this year's retreat. It felt very familiar and just in the noticing of the planning it seemed completely unnecessary. In previous years there has been much planning and scheduling. What would it be like without the planning? Curiosity rises.

Without planning, in daily practice, a general theme appears: Sleep, Eat, Meditate. These are my priorities - in that order - then repeat. Hearing this, several people wondered if they could join participate, too. The S.E.M. © ® ™ © retreat program. It might be quite popular.



*S.E.M. Retreat Method: Sleep, Eat, Meditate
then...repeat.*

Planning and scheduling - these are thinking about retreat. They may be necessary, in some small manner, but they are not the essence of retreat. No matter how much the thinking mind generates ideas, suggestions, options, expectations, excitement, assumptions, these are not retreat. In fact, they can cover over, shadow or obstruct the very point of engaging in a retreat.

Doing

Once the time for retreat arrives another layer becomes more clear. Doing retreat is also not its essence. Doing of the plan, schedule, ideas, etc. is just walking through, acting out the story generated by thinking about retreat. This meditation time; that chi kung routine. Tai chi here, sitting there. Doing may feel good, it may seem better than our regular daily routines and schedule. And, this even may be quite useful and relaxing. However, the acting out of the thinking and planning is not the full essence of retreat.

So, if thinking, planning, scheduling and doing retreat are not its essence, what is? Being

retreat.

This highlights the distinction between doing and being. Being retreat drops several levels below the storylines of thinking, planning, scheduling or even doing the activities (or non-activities) of retreat. Being fully present, in a moment-to-moment basis, allows spaciousness and a natural way of retreat spontaneously arises.

It may look like the plan or doing (or not doing) and yet it has a remarkably different energy, rhythm, resonance. This natural spaciousness of being retreat allows whatever is to be, in this moment... and then this moment... and then this moment... and then....

To borrow, with permission, from our friend Rumi:

This being on retreat is like a guesthouse
every moment a new arrival.
Sometimes there appears a depression, sadness, grief
other times a joy, harmony, illumination.

Welcome and attend to them all with a smile
for they are each a valuable guide
to that natural way of all things.

Decompression

There is a transition from regular, daily life to retreat. It is rarely recognizable beforehand, or even while it is happening. Over time it begins to feel like decompression from the internal and external pressures of this life with all its aspects.

I've noticed a very regular pattern of this decompression taking 2 weeks of a month-long retreat. Knowing it beforehand doesn't speed anything up. Even during the process it's not quite noticeable. Yet, somehow, at just the natural time, I wake up one morning and everything has changed. It feels like dropping down several levels instantly. Light illumines in a subtly different way.

At the moment of this shift, there can be rising frustration, seemingly wasting half of a precious retreat time this way. Sitting with the frustration, welcoming it to the guesthouse, reveals another layer. Hmmm...it only took 2 weeks.

Benefits

Retreat offers the same benefits of being in harmony with the natural way of things. Retreat allows space to observe, experience and feel this natural way in whatever context it arises. It might be out in the forest, on the coast, in the desert or mountains. It can easily occur in our own living space, bringing the energy of retreat to our home.

Being on retreat naturally has more quiet. Engaging less with the external noises of the world and our lives can illuminate the multitude of internal noises. Without some silence this is difficult to recognize or understand the impact such external and internal noise has on body, mind and spirit.

The slower pace of retreat provides for moments of stillness. Physical stillness, like

silence, illuminates how much unconscious frantic external and internal movements constantly operates, especially in the mind. Touching stillness can be a deep letting go, if only for a moment or two, of a lifetime of constant activity.

Appreciation and Gratitude

Silence. Stillness. Awareness. Spaciousness to experience the natural way of just this moment to spontaneously appear and then... disappear. Curiosity. What supports this process? What gets in the way?

I am full of gratitude for everyone who supports me in many ways so that I can follow this curiosity during retreat, deepening our understanding of the natural way as it appears in our daily lives. Thank you!

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