

## Retreat from Ordinary Thoughts

By Flint Sparks

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A couple of years ago I arrived on a cold January evening with more than 50 other participants to begin a weeklong silent meditation retreat. The retreat leader offered us some advice and encouragement as we entered the silence by suggesting that we reconsider our usual understanding of the word "retreat." Most commonly we think of a retreat as a means of temporarily setting aside the responsibilities and concerns of daily life in order to enter into the silence and solitude of contemplation. This leader suggested a more challenging possibility. He asked us to "consider that this is a time in which you have the opportunity to retreat from your habitual ways of retreating from yourself and your life. Most of the time, we are too busy and too distracted to look very deeply at ourselves. We retreat from reality. This week of silent meditation and teaching offers you the possibility of retreating from this form of avoidance. What does it take to have the courage to 'retreat' and face not only who you think you are, but all of the ways in which you hide among the demands of daily life?"

I began to think more seriously about the kind of courage it takes to face life without the usual diversions. How was I to handle the inevitable sense of anxiety and fear that would emerge as I settled into the silence and took off the masks? What kind of faith was required to endure such a practice?

In the early Buddhist sutras (scriptures) the word that we usually translate as "faith" is the Pali word *saddha*. This word is a verb. Faith is something we do and not something we possess. It literally means "to place the heart open" and is seen as an ongoing practice rather than a commodity we either have or don't have. So, the practice of sitting down, quieting down, and looking at whatever presents itself, requires this kind of active faith. And it requires uncommon courage. How do you place your heart open when you are not always so happy with what you find inside?

The contemporary Zen teacher Charlotte Joko Beck offers this perspective: "The (so-called) secret of life that we are all looking for is just this: to develop through sitting and daily life practice the power and courage to return to that which we have spent a lifetime hiding from, to rest in the bodily experience of the present moment – even if it is a feeling of being humiliated, of failing, of abandonment, or unfairness."

Faith in the Buddhist tradition emphasizes this ability to offer our heart to the reality of what is happening in each moment and to discover the deepest truths on which we can rely. These truths emerge more clearly through contemplative practice so that we are able to touch more intimately our true nature, the deepest reality of who we are.

All of the world's great mystical traditions consist of profound practices that quiet the small self that we pretend we are. These practices awaken us to our True Self that is our fundamental ground of being and connects us with all things. We learn that to love one person completely is to love everyone. With practice we relax the contraction of spirit we call the small, individual self and open to what could be called Vast Emptiness in the Buddhist tradition or the Complete Fullness of Spirit in the Christian tradition.

This gives a whole new meaning to the words I saw every Sunday morning as a boy, "Do This in Remembrance of Me." Do this ongoing practice of waking up and realize that your fundamental nature, the deepest reality of who you are, is Me in you. Have the faith to retreat from what is easy and ordinary and discover the unending source of wisdom and compassion that is who we truly are, together.

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