

Insight Retreat Center

NEWSLETTER

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With this issue we are launching a newsletter for people interested in the Insight Retreat Center. It will serve as a way to keep people informed about the center, including the schedule of retreats that we will have. As you look at this first issue, please imagine future issues with an extensive listing of residential retreats by wonderful teachers.

The newsletter is also meant to support the sense of community that is already forming around IRC. It has been gratifying and encouraging to have so many volunteers and supporters contributing to the center and to the network of goodwill at the heart of our efforts.

Through regular articles about retreat practice, we hope that the newsletter will offer support and inspiration to all who are interested in retreats. We also hope the newsletter will help people feel connected and inspired by the retreat center even when they are not on retreat.

The best of gifts

*Is a place of shelter, a place of ease,
 A dwelling place to meditate and see.*

*May those concerned with the greater good
 Build a dwelling for the wise
 For they will teach the Dharma that ends
 suffering.*

*Seeing right here the truth of the Dharma,
 One is purified and freed.*

—The Buddha, *Cullavagga VI.1.5*

The Silence of a Silent Retreat

Gil Fronsdal

Silence is a prominent feature of most insight meditation retreats. While on retreat, participants are silent for extended periods of time, often far longer than they have ever been in any other situation. Once the retreat begins, retreatants agree to limit their talking solely to necessary speech, such as speaking to a teacher during an interview, or asking a question during work meditation. In addition, they have only a few occasions to hear anyone else speak. The result is a pervasive silence that serves as a foundation for the meditation practice and creates a palpable and nourishing atmosphere of stillness.

Silence can be challenging for some people at the beginning of their first retreat. Because it is a new and unfamiliar experience, retreat silence can be confusing. This is especially true when a person's primary associations with silence are uncomfortable—for example, when his or her only experience of social silence is interpersonal discomfort, loneliness, or exclusion.

Most people, however, come to cherish the silence of retreat. Even those who were intimidated by it in the beginning often find such peace in the silence that they are reluctant to give it up at the end. As people become aware of its richness, they come to look forward to silence rather than fear it.

Retreat silence has many benefits. Because social conversation keeps the mind active, periods of not talking help the mind rest. Silence settles the many emotions that are activated by talking, listening, and even in the anticipation of talking. As our mental and emotional lives calm down, our bodies relax.

Silence allows for a heightened sense of intimacy with the world. In sustained silence our senses become more acute, and both the inner and outer world can appear to us with greater clarity. For example, we may begin to notice the birdsong we previously failed to hear, or we may tune in to our quieter thoughts, which normally get drowned out.

The primary reason for silence on meditation retreats is to support our meditation practice. Silence helps keep our focus on cultivating mindfulness and concentration. Continuity of mindfulness is much easier when we don't talk. The complex interplay of emotions and attitudes involved in most social interactions tend to keep the mind too active and scattered to allow for deep concentration. And this internal activity often lingers. The mental momentum from a conversation is seldom finished when we stop talking. It can take a while for the thinking mind to quiet down after a conversation ends.

For most people, the silence of a retreat creates a space in which they can see themselves more clearly. Rather than being actively distracted by work, relationships, the Internet, music, or various external events, they have an opportunity to notice overlooked feelings and concerns. The sustained periods of silence give people a chance to observe the subtle, important motivations and values behind how they live.

Retreats are also a great place to discover what Buddhism calls "noble silence." This is a beautiful state of mind that comes when discursive thinking has stopped. Discursive thinking refers to thought that proceeds like an inner discourse in our own minds. It may be imagining conversations with others, remembering past conversations, or talking to ourselves. It may involve abstract, analytical thinking about what is happening in the

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The Silence of a Silent Retreat, cont'd

present moment. As discursive thinking quiets down, the mind becomes more peaceful. As agitation decreases, desire and aversion lessen. When this inner stilling is accompanied by confidence, purity, and equanimity then the mind is said to experience the fullness of “noble silence.”

Because insight meditation retreats are group retreats, practitioners spend a lot of time in silence alongside others. As they relax into the collective stillness, participants often discover that being together with others in silence allows for a rich sense of connection that is more satisfying than if they had spent the same time engaged in conversation. Rather than knowing others through the stories of who they are, what they do, and what they have done, the silence highlights our shared humanity and a direct feeling of empathy and rapport. A wonderful lesson to take away from a retreat is how the quiet ways of being with others can allow for a deep sense of connection.

As people discover the great value of retreat silence, they can explore the uses of silence in daily life. Learning to be comfortable with silence expands what is possible in our relationships—both with others and ourselves. Spending time in silence can enrich both. In particular, it can be a great support in helping us discover greater spiritual freedom wherever we are. And with freedom we can experience stillness and peace even in the midst of speech.

Retreats: A Personal Journey that Nourishes Everyone

Andrea Fella

In the first years of my meditation practice, I saw the powerful benefits of mindfulness in my daily life. From this, I was drawn to exploring the practice further through silent meditation retreats. My early retreats were heart-opening and eye-opening. The first 10-day retreat gave me a taste of the love and compassion the practice can bring.

On a subsequent retreat, which I called “Andrea 101”, I gained an appreciation of how the sustained practice on retreat reveals the habitual patterns and reactions of the mind. I discovered how I created my own struggles with these habits. This began a journey through the landscape of my own mind; a journey that has deeply transformed my mental habits and reactivity, and has led to much more peace and ease in my life.

Over the years since, my practice has flowed between periods of silent retreat and extended periods devoted to mindfulness in daily life. Each way of practicing supported and nourished the other. The deepening understanding that happened on retreat was slowly integrated into my daily life as I practiced there. Practicing mindfulness in my daily life allowed for a further deepening on retreat.

Now as a teacher of mediation retreats, I have seen how many others have the same heart-opening and eye-opening experience as they enter into the retreat container. It is beautiful to witness the deep inner journey as it unfolds, and to see the outward manifestation of grace that results with the practice.

The opportunity to sit a silent meditation retreat is an incredible gift, not only to ourselves, but also to everyone we interact with. Because of the many benefits they bring, the Insight Meditation Center community has been organizing multi-day, residential retreats for many years. Seven years ago, the community took a leap of faith to offer the gift of these retreats freely, as *dana*, with no charge to the participants. I deeply value the integrity, trust, goodwill, and generosity that is conveyed through our *dana* retreats. And the long waiting lists for our retreats show the value and benefit that others find through this practice. I am quite moved to be a part of a community that is inspired to offer the gift of retreat freely. It is a gift that nourishes everyone.

With the purchase and renovation of the retreat center facility, we will be able to offer many more retreats throughout the

year, opening the doors for more people to initiate or continue their own journey through this amazing practice.

I am inspired by and very grateful for all the people who have joined together to bring the new Insight Retreat Center into being. The generous offerings of many volunteers and donors are weaving a web of support that will nourish the Dharma for many years to come.

Retreat practice continues to nourish and deeply support my own life. It is a privilege to be able to offer that support to others in return. And offering that support while being held by a container of generosity feels like a true connection to the lineage of the Buddha's teaching.

Volunteering

Many volunteers have been helping with gardening, cleaning, organizing, and preparing the building for its renovation. We are very grateful for their inspiring generosity! If you'd like to volunteer, please fill out a form at: www.insightretreatcenter.org/volunteer

IRC Email List

To receive future e-mail newsletters and updates from IRC, please subscribe to our email list at www.insightretreatcenter.org



A Practitioner's Perspective: A Conversation with Victor Medina

Dawn Neal, an experienced retreat practitioner, interviews Victor Medina about retreat practice and the impact it has had on his life as he faces the end of his experience of living with cancer.

Dawn: *It's clear from our past conversations that you have a deep love of retreat practice. Can you talk about that?*

Victor: It's difficult to explain why you'd want to go on retreat to those who haven't done it. It can be like a very arduous backpacking trip. You might get blisters, or it could be cold and rainy. But there are also amazing experiences and vistas. Afterwards, I don't know anyone who isn't looking at a calendar to schedule their next retreat!

The transformations that can occur are so profound. In my experience, it's a gentle process, and things fall away in their time. For me, practice has been a maturation process of facing what is difficult and not shifting away. There's a capacity people develop with practice—things loosen and open up.

Retreat is a refuge where you meet yourself in a container of like-minded individuals. It's a beautiful, supportive environment for such a unique exploration. I haven't found a parallel to its specialness.

Dawn: *It's interesting to me that you keyed in to the support of community.*

Victor: I didn't know that community was such a strong component until I was involved and saw how beneficial it is for us to support each other. During retreat there is both ease and difficulty. It's not sitting on a beach drinking little umbrella drinks. There are times you see things you'd rather not see! Sangha is actually very important. As the Buddha says, having noble friends is everything. When like-minded people come together to practice, it's really something. It provides the support of *ahimsa*, harmlessness. By being wholesome, each of us allows others to be fearless in this transformative process. That's a huge gift.

Dawn: *How does retreat practice inform your letting go process?*

Victor: Practice seems like preparation for everything, whether you're confronted with pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral events in life. Those who successfully navigate the shallow shoals of life have found ways to meet and work through difficulties. It's perhaps a slower process for those who cannot see their hindrances directly, as we see them so readily on retreat. Regardless, I feel like we are all somehow in this river floating towards eventual liberation. It feels like there is a momentum towards wholeness, clarity, and understanding.

Dawn: *You've been practicing with the six sense doors a lot recently. Can you talk about that?*

Victor: It's been a way to settle into what is going on, to get out of my own way. It's a sort of doorway to becoming more grounded. It's the antidote to living in one's head and helps in not creating unnecessary stories. For me, this has really been the path, becoming more and more embodied. Which is interesting, as one prepares to leave the body.

Dawn: *I'm wondering what that means, being settled into embodied presence, at this stage—when you're preparing to leave the body.*

Victor: It's time. In this letting go process, I haven't grasped at different practices. Humans have been at it for thousands of years—I'm in good company. There's going to be an inherent capability or wisdom available. I totally trust it, actually. This would not be occurring if it couldn't be met.

The other aspects of leaving a householder life are more complicated, family and kids, for example. That they get to be involved with it, is also a part of this unfolding, however. I have so much gratitude for my family, friendships, community, practice, life.

Renovation & Fundraising Update

The planning and preparation for converting our new building into a retreat center is in full gear. After extensive work with our architect and engineers, we are almost ready to submit construction documents to the Santa Cruz Building Department. It should take about 6 weeks for review, during which time we will select a contractor for the project.

It has become clear that it will be significantly more economical to complete as much of the project as possible during our first phase of construction. How much we will be able to do depends on how much more money we raise. So far, with the generosity of many people we have raised \$1.1 million dollars in three months. We are inspired and grateful for this wonderful show of support. To be able to commit to a significant part of the project we would like to raise an additional \$500,000 in the next couple months. Every donation will help us complete as much of the work as possible.

To support the renovation project, please go to www.insightretreatcenter.org or email insightretreatcenter@gmail.com or 408/663-1906.

Help IRC While Buying or Selling a Home

I'm an IMC sangha member and long-time local real estate broker, now retired. If you are thinking of selling your home I can refer you to a conscientious realtor and negotiate a reduced brokerage fee. If you are thinking of buying, I can refer you to a highly qualified realtor who will assist you in identifying properties, areas, loans, etc.

Buying or selling, the realtor will make a donation in your name to our Retreat Center.

I will be available as your consultant at no charge through the whole process. I have helped facilitate this process for sangha members in San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz and other Bay Area counties.

If you have any real estate questions, or would like to discuss buying or selling your home, call Carol Collins at 408/348-1385 or carolcollins888@gmail.com.

Insight Retreat Center

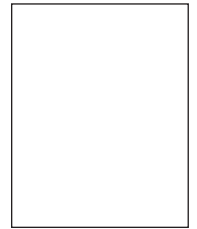
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RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED



Zafus and Things

Tip on Preparing for Retreats for Those Who Sit on the Floor Cross-Legged

Most of us spend much of our days sitting in chairs. We might then go on a meditation retreat where we attempt to spend most of the day sitting on the floor. And often, the body complains. Some people find the transition to sitting on the floor mild, but for others the transition can be quite difficult.

Suggestion: Many of us spend some of our leisure time each day on the computer, on the phone or reading. We can take advantage of that time and do those same activities while sitting on the floor. You can set your book or laptop on a coffee table, and just relax in a comfortable and erect sitting posture or maybe even eat a meal while sitting on the floor. Sitting cross-legged for additional time each day allows the hips and legs to more deeply adapt to the position, increasing circulation and flexibility and strengthening the back, making the transition to sitting on the floor during retreat much easier. —Ines Freedman

Daylong Retreat at Insight Retreat Center

We are pleased to announce the first retreat at IRC on October 8. Once our renovation is complete, this newsletter will list a rich offering of retreats with a wealth of wise and compassionate teachers. We are delighted this retreat will be offered by the primary teachers at Vipassana Santa Cruz.

A Day of Blessing and Reconciliation

Saturday, October 8 • 10am to 4pm

Taught by Mary Grace Orr and Bob Stahl

IRC, 1906 Glen Canyon Rd, Santa Cruz

Describing the retreat Mary Grace writes, “As the Insight Retreat Center opens and develops, we are offering a day of meditation and silence to begin to bless the land and the space with our practice. We will offer periods of sitting and walking meditations throughout the day, some instruction and a Dharma talk. There will also be a period of guided reconciliation and forgiveness practice, honoring the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur”.

No registration necessary. Please bring a bag lunch and meditation cushion if you use one.

Carpooling: Because our parking is limited, carpooling is important. To coordinate carpooling, contact:

- Peninsula: Pat White, 650/906-1505 whitepatrici@gmail.com
- Santa Cruz: Ann Zweig, 831/428-2736 vipassanasc@gmail.com