

## T W E N T Y

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### to deepen: a weekend meditation retreat at home

When is the best time to take a couple of days out of your routine to reconnect with your heart and soul, your creative muse, your deepest longings—or simply to rest? When is the best time to remember the person who lives and breathes underneath all of your responsibilities, concerns, hopes, and fears?

The best time is now.

This program invites you to go into your room or home, shut the door literally and metaphorically, unplug all connections, and let go of everyday concerns. During this weekend retreat, I ask you to separate yourself from your daily life and immerse yourself in reflective practices. It begins on a Friday at dinnertime and ends on Sunday after lunch.

This program is based on retreats I have led around the world. It is meant to help you go within, rest your mind, and make space for your innate wisdom to arise.

To prepare

1. Select a weekend (or any two-and-a-half-day period) and put it on your calendar. You can start tomorrow or in six months; it doesn't matter. What matters is committing to it. This commitment marks the beginning of the retreat.
2. Set up a meditation area in your home or room. If you already have one, that's great. If not, choose a spot with room for a meditation cushion or a chair.
3. If you feel so moved, create an altar. There is more detail on this earlier in the book, in the section called "Make Offerings" (see chapter 12, "Setting Up Your Space").
4. If you don't have a journal, buy, find, or make one. It can be a beautiful notebook or just some notepaper in a binder. You will be doing a journaling exercise or two during the retreat, so choose paper and a pen you enjoy writing with. Best not to use a computer.
5. Find something to use as a meditation timer. A simple kitchen egg timer will do, or a timer app for your handheld device. But since you will not be going online during the retreat, if you use an app, be sure

to avoid the temptation to check email or revise your Netflix queue.

6. Let those closest to you know you'll be engaged in this program for a weekend. Ask for their understanding and support. Tell them you may not be able to respond to phone calls, texts, or e-mails immediately.

As much as possible, prepare things in advance and lean on family, friends, or roommates to handle your usual daily chores.

7. Get all your grocery shopping done for the weekend before it begins.

8. Choose and purchase a book you'd like to read during the retreat. It is best to choose something that supports you on your inner journey. Use your judgment and select something that will challenge you to delve within rather than escape.

#### Retreat tools

##### *Meditation*

The meditation practice we will be doing is called *shamatha*. *Shamatha* is a Sanskrit word that means the “practice of tranquillity.” So this retreat is an excellent place to begin.

If you have a regular meditation practice, you will simply be doing that technique, but for longer sessions than you may be used to.

If you are new to meditation or if you simply need a refresher, please review the basic instruction here.

### *Journaling*

During your retreat, I ask you to do a very simple journaling exercise following your morning meditation on Saturday and Sunday. It is called “free writing” or “morning pages,” as coined by the wonderful writer Julia Cameron. Free writing is simply this: you pick up pen and paper (don’t use a computer) and just start writing down whatever comes to mind until you fill three pages. It can be anything. Whatever words are in your head, transcribe them onto the page.

They do not have to make any sense.

They do not have to be punctuated correctly.

Don’t worry about spelling.

You never have to read or share these pages.

Usually, free writing pages look something like this:

*I don't know why I'm doing this, this makes no sense. My neck hurts. I wonder if that will interfere with my meditation practice. God, I am so worried that so-and-so will email me during this retreat and they'll be pissed if I don't get back right away. I ate too much oatmeal for breakfast. I am so sad that dad is so sick. I wish I could do anything to relieve his suffering.*

*If only I was a nurse. I should have gone to nursing school!!*

Etcetera, etcetera.

The basic rule of thumb is simply to keep your hand moving across the page. You don't have to be a speed demon, but do keep moving. Remember: your thoughts don't have to make sense or be in any discernible sequence. You can even throw these pages away after you're done, if you like.

Depending on how quickly you write, this exercise will take from twenty-five to forty-five minutes.

### *Nourishment and Health*

I'd like to take a moment and visit this important topic.

I suggest a dietary component for the retreat, although not a complicated one: you don't have to give up meat, coffee, or sugar or eat only vegetables, but please simplify the foods you eat during the retreat and, if you can, for a few days in advance of the retreat start date, so you don't have to spend a lot of time during the retreat figuring out a new food-preparation routine.

For the duration of the retreat, the only guideline I suggest is to eat and drink high-quality foods and beverages. This means nothing packaged, processed, or genetically engineered. If you drink coffee, buy organic

beans. If you want to eat candy, get some good-quality, minimally processed chocolate. If you eat a ham sandwich for lunch every day, make it nitrate-free and on whole grain bread. Instead of sugared cereals for breakfast, try a granola that isn't too sweet. If you eat meat, buy organic and if you like a glass of wine with dinner, buy yourself a special bottle.

Plan a trip to the health food store or do the best you can at your regular grocery store. For beverages, stick mostly with water, milk (whole, soy, almond, etc.), coffee, tea, and fruit or vegetable juices. Avoid soda unless you'll spend the whole weekend with a headache if you don't get your cola. If you hate to cook and eat only takeout, buy your to-go food from a health-conscious establishment. This is not a diet by any means, and you don't have to get overly strict with yourself; simply try to cut as many chemicals as you can from what you are eating. Doing so will leave your mind clearer.

If you already consume largely unprocessed and organic foods, great. Just keep doing what you are doing. In all cases, try not to use this time to make sweeping changes. Simply avoid bad foods, consume good ones, and keep it very simple.

Also during this time, please avoid excessive alcohol or recreational drugs, because these substances can make meditation very confusing. If you have an

alcohol or drug problem or are undergoing medical or psychiatric treatment, please don't start this program. Consult your doctor and wait for a time when you are able to devote your attention to it fully. If you are taking prescription medications, of course you should continue to take them according to your doctor's instructions.

If you have any concern whatsoever about this program, please check with a health professional before beginning it.

### *Keep It Sacred*

To begin this program, please refer back to chapter 13 and review the steps listed in "Keeping It Sacred." Thoroughly refresh your memory about what it takes to create a sanctified endeavor (rather than one rooted in self-improvement).

### *Rest*

It can seem odd to consider rest as a tool, but it is likely to be the most powerful one of the weekend.

We are all so busy.

We are all so preoccupied.

We are all so accustomed to 24/7 entertainment.

Leaving it all behind for an entire weekend can be thrilling, daunting, nerve-wracking, or a delight. During your retreat, it is likely to be all of the above.

This weekend, there will be long periods of time designated for “rest.” This can mean any number of things. When it is time to rest, please choose from the following activities only:

Napping

Daydreaming

Reading (something related to your inner pursuits)

Taking a walk

Staring into space

Drawing, painting, photography, writing poetry—any of the arts—but purely for purposes of creative joy. No work!! No trying to prove anything!

Some things notably missing from this list:

Watching TV

Going online

Talking on the phone

Household chores

Errands

Please try to reserve this weekend for the pleasures of rest and solitude.

Rest is different than spacing out. True rest imparts the qualities of absorption and delight. Spacing out tends to make us both dull and speedy.

#### The schedule

The aforementioned Julia Cameron once said, “The first rule of magic is containment,” and I have never heard truer words. Often we think that the way to begin a new program—whether it’s a dietary change, a workout routine, or a spiritual practice—is to talk to some friends, read a few books, maybe take a class, and then give it a shot. But there is an additional element that is important to your success: the form you create to stabilize your efforts. Without the proper environment, the excitement and energy of a new endeavor can dissipate rather quickly.

The schedule outlined herein creates the environment. It is the container for this program. It will create the form and structure that will allow the energy to build. Without this containment, there is no energy or magic. So following the program as carefully as you can is important.

#### The schedule

Now you are ready to practice.

Once you have finished your practice, connect with

whatever benefit you may have created for yourself through undertaking this practice. Once you have this felt sense, give it away. In whatever way feels natural for you, make the aspiration that the results of your practice could be used to also benefit others. This is very important. As mentioned in chapter 13, my teacher, Sakyong Mipham, says that not dedicating the merit is like not hitting the “save” button on your Word doc before shutting the program down.

If you belong to a tradition that employs a traditional dedication of merit (mine is on the last page of this book), you could use that. It’s also great to simply say to yourself, “I offer my practice so that it may benefit everyone.” Give it away.

### *Friday*

When you come home from work Friday night, make sure your meditation area is set up. Sometime in the evening, have a seat on your meditation cushion with your journal for a brief journaling exercise. Settle onto your cushion and take a moment to just sit there and appreciate wherever you are. What can you see, hear, smell, and so on?

Noticing the space you’re in is a simple way to come into the present moment.

Open your journal and finish these sentences:

Please help me to \_\_\_\_\_ so that I may \_\_\_\_\_.

Please guide me to \_\_\_\_\_ so that I may \_\_\_\_\_.

Please show me \_\_\_\_\_ so that I may \_\_\_\_\_.

Please teach me \_\_\_\_\_ so that I may \_\_\_\_\_.

Let these sentiments be your offering for tonight.

Practice meditation for ten minutes before bed.

Dedicate the merit.

### *Saturday*

(Times are approximate. I've started your day at 7 AM, but if that makes you nuts, shift everything an hour back or forward to accommodate your body rhythms.)

7:00–7:30 *Meditation*. If you're accustomed to ten-minute sits, this could seem like a lot. That's okay. Go for it. Use your timer, commit, and see what happens. It may be way easier or harder than you thought, or it may be none of the above.

7:30–8:15 *Free Writing*. Get out your journal and simply let the words flow.

8:15–9:45 *Breakfast Prep, Consumption, Clean Up*. Prepare yourself a delicious breakfast, based on what “delicious” means to you. If you're an “eggs and bacon” gal, go for it. If you're a “just a cup of coffee” guy, go for it. Whatever you choose, make your food of the

highest quality possible, to the best of your ability to find and afford it. Feed yourself well, not according to the latest health findings nor as an act of indulgence. Feeding yourself well means putting good-quality ingredients down the hatch. Nothing processed. No chemicals.

Make sure to clean up—not OCD-style, but thoroughly. There is something delightful about finishing the job wholeheartedly. And right now, you've got nothing but time . . .

9:45–11:30 *Rest*. As you may recall, your choices for rest include sleeping, daydreaming, reading something uplifting, going for a walk, just staring into space, and so on. Nothing to accomplish. Nothing to prove.

11:30–12:00 *Meditation*. Let yourself enjoy another period of breath-awareness meditation. Notice how (or if) this session differed from the morning practice. If you feel like journaling about your experience, please do.

If you feel like writing a poem, please do. If you do not, please don't.

12:00–2:00 *Lunch Prep, Consumption, Clean Up*. Make yourself an awesome lunch. Best to keep it kind of light, otherwise your afternoon practice could be on the sleepy side. As you are preparing your food, just prepare your

food. Don't listen to music or flip through a magazine. Just prepare, eat, and clean up. Take your time.

2:00–5:00 *Rest*. At this point, you may be growing weary of rest. Seriously. Hang in there with it. Don't give in to the temptation to just quickly check email or catch thirty minutes of *Real Housewives of Orange County*. It would be great if you could fit taking a walk into this time period. I highly recommend choosing a dharma book to accompany you during your retreat. Reading about meditation is especially helpful. For suggested books, see Appendix C: Resources.

5:00–5:30 *Meditation*.

5:30–7:00 *Dinner Prep, Consumption, Clean Up*.

7:00–8:00 *Journaling Exercise (Optional)*. Retreat is a great time to step back and take a larger than usual view of your life. The purpose of this exercise isn't to get you to see what needs changing or how you can improve things—it's simply meant to help you contemplate your situation within a peaceful environment.

1. What three things do I love about myself?
2. What three things scare me about myself?
3. How can I honor my body?

4. What can't I say?
5. What can't I feel?
6. Who do I need to forgive?
7. Who needs to forgive me?
8. What is unfolding in my life right now?
9. Who are my true friends?
10. What is my intuition about what is unfolding in my life?

Take your time answering these questions. Let each one act as a writing prompt and just start putting words on the page in response. See what happens. You can answer all of them or pick and choose the ones that appeal to you most.

8:00–8:30 *Meditation*. This is your final practice session of the day. Please give yourself props for spending two whole hours in meditation practice on this day. That is such an awesome achievement.

8:30 *Dedicate the Merit*. Hang out until bedtime. It's totally fine to go to bed as early as possible. Let yourself enjoy the luxury of sleep.

### *Sunday*

The Sunday schedule is largely a reprise of Saturday morning. Your retreat will end at lunch.

You are obviously free to resume your regular activities when the retreat is over, but, if possible, try to keep the rest of the day simple.

7:00–7:30 *Meditation*

7:30–8:15 *Free writing*

8:15–9:45 *Breakfast prep, consumption, clean up*

9:45–11:30 *Rest*

11:30–12:00 *Meditation*

12:00–2:00 *Lunch prep, consumption, clean up*

2:00 *Dedicate the merit*

The best way to end a meditation retreat is to end it when it's over. Meaning, don't end it before it's over (oh, well, there's only an hour left, I might as well stop now) and don't prolong it beyond the end by trying to hang on to a peaceful vibe.

Just as you stay with the entire out-breath during meditation practice, not abandoning it to skip ahead to the next in-breath, don't abandon your retreat. Stay, stay, stay with it until the end. But no further.

Don't hang on to it or push it away. Simply watch it dissolve. This itself is excellent practice.

As your weekend draws to a close, please accept my gratitude and appreciation for your having completed it. This is no small thing. If you'd like to share what

it was like for you, I know that I and the entire Open Heart Project community would love to hear about it. You can subscribe to the Open Heart Project newsletter by visiting my website and it is also a great way to receive ongoing (free) meditation instruction from me.