

A short guide to online retreating at home

Bob Chase - Mindful in the City



Introduction

These tips are meant for those of you who want to create a mini day retreat for yourselves using the structure of the Mindfulness Day of Practice.

I recommend you only do this if you feel confident to do so. If in doubt or if you have any questions do email me at bob@mindfulinthecity.co.uk

What is a retreat?

“It transpires that the best response to being stuck at home quietly is to spend even more time at home and to get even quieter”*

Retreats have been a part of contemplative, artistic and spiritual practice for thousands of years. They occur in many cultures and in many settings and over many time periods. In its simplest form ‘Retreat’ means, simply, ‘to withdraw, to drawback.’ Typically, retreats include:

- Withdrawal from everyday activities
- An intention to turn one’s attention inward
- Being in solitude or limiting interactions with others
- Some formal “practices” e.g. meditation, prayer, contemplation
- Reflection on one’s experience
- Often taking place in a secluded location
- May be solitary or with a group
- Often in silence for all or part of the time
- Commonly led by an experienced teacher or practitioner

Mindfulness retreats tend to follow traditional patterns of Buddhist retreats. This is mainly because many of the meditative practices are similar and the format has proven to be very effective. Mindfulness retreats are, of course, secular in nature and do not include any religious content or teaching.

Why retreat?

“mindfulness is furthered most by frequency, by more moments of mindfulness in a row”

Sharon Salzberg - bestselling author and meditation teacher.

Most of us understand that dedicating some time to purely focus on one activity can be very beneficial. This is true of physical and intellectual pursuits. Sports people certainly know that working out intensively for a period can lead to improved performance. Musicians know that workshops and long rehearsals can lead to better playing. Chess players know that intensive tournaments can “up their game”

Alongside this, plenty of studies tell us that regular daily practice of an activity is the surest way to embed that that activity in the mind and even make changes to the brain’s physiology. It seems that more intense periods of practice compliment and reinforce the regular daily practice.

Here are what I think are a few of the benefits of retreats:

- Its simplicity gives us one focus – the practice of mindfulness
- We can discover what it’s like to extend practice for longer periods
- We can get a break from routine activities and concerns
- We may often get a feeling of support that comes from being part of a group
- We might become usefully aware of thoughts and feelings that we often suppress
- We have the guidance and support of an experienced teacher

One must be aware that retreats can be challenging and are often not the relaxing, blissful experience we might hope them to be. Like every meditation, each retreat should be approached with an open mind. By setting aside expectations before the retreat there is room for experiences to unfold without disappointment or worry.

The chances are that you will have ups and downs during each retreat. It may, of course, all be dull and frustrating or exciting and insightful, but that is unlikely. Observing these changes and our reactions to them all form part of the practice during a retreat.

Most people do not regret retreating, whatever their experience, it deepens the knowing of ourselves.

Online retreats

Before the Covid Pandemic online retreats were a rarity. To those of us who have enjoyed retreats over many years the very idea seems crazy. Getting away physically from where we live our

everyday lives seemed to be an essential ingredient of a retreat. Being in solitude yet in proximity to others was not replicable in any other form.

Like so many other things we never thought of doing, “online” retreats have evolved to make the best of ZOOM and all other similar platforms. It is not exactly the same experience but it has worked much better than anyone expected.

It also had some additional qualities that were unexpected: It managed to combine elements of home-based self-guided retreats and formal teacher-led retreats. This led to a type of retreat that better integrated practice into our everyday environment. Many people found this a surprise and a welcome benefit.



Preparing to retreat online at home

“In actual fact, to retreat in the space I have spent so much time these last 10 months made it more powerful, not less. And it’s amazing how a couple of candles can transform your living room from Work From Home to Wonder Filled Hermitage”*

In advance of the day

Setting things aside

The essence of a retreat is to withdraw from everyday activities as much as possible. This doesn't mean going to extremes, but should mean cancelling any other events or activities for the day. So take a look at your diary and postpone activities or get them done ahead of time.

Tell your family and friends what you plan to do and seek their support.

Because we are, probably, retreating in our homes it's likely that friends and/or family are going to be around. Even if they are not physically close they may want to call for a chat. Explaining to them what you are doing should allay any concerns they might have and prevent them calling on the day.

It's a good idea to explain that you will not be engaging or communicating with them as usual. In fact you might to seek their support by asking them not to expect talking at all, unless really necessary. Choose in advance how you want to "play it" Set some boundaries.

Silence

During most meditation retreats participants are asked to refrain from, or at least limit, speaking. This is tough for some people but it is intended to let everyone take a break from the need to constantly engage with others. Treat it as an experiment. Many people find it a relief not to have to worry about what to say or how to respond. Of course this does not apply to necessary interactions or in emergency situations.

You can decide to be silent during the "break" periods between formal sessions. If you choose to do this you might want to let your friends and family know. I would suggest that you, at least, limit the conversations you do have. Discover what is like not to have to speak.

Organise where you will be doing the retreat

Not everyone can have the place to themselves, but it may be possible to negotiate the use of a room for the duration of the retreat. As long as it allows you to sit comfortably and is warm or cool enough it will be OK. If it is possible to have a piece of floor to lie down on for movement practices, that would be ideal but even that is not essential.

Nor is it essential for the space to be uncluttered (although helpful) or sound proof! Sounds from outside and inside your building will come and go... but that's OK.

Get comfy

There is probably no perfect chair or meditation cushion that will guarantee you comfort during the retreat. It is, however, a good idea to install something that you are happy to use for longer practices. Wearing comfy loose clothes is a good idea, no one is watching you. Having a blanket or warm jumper handy might also be useful.



Organise the food and refreshments you will need

To minimise your interaction with the “outside” world it may be a good idea to shop or even cook in advance of the retreat day. You may want to plan your meals in advance so you have all the ingredients. There will be plenty of time between formal online sessions to prepare your meals.

The encouragement is to make cooking, eating and washing up part of the retreat practice, rather than see it as a chore or distraction.

Make sure your computer and equipment is ready

Check out you have everything you need and that it is in the right place. Make sure you have the links you need and any passwords.

Try and get a good nights sleep the night before

It really helps not to be hungover and tired when starting a retreat!

On the day

Waking up

Make sure you set an alarm and leave yourself enough time for a hot drink before the first session of the day. You might even begin your mindfulness practice as you begin to wake up. Perhaps by paying attention to the transition out of sleep, noticing how the body feels and where your attention is.



Self Care

During an online retreat support is available but otherwise the tutor will not be checking in with you, especially during a one-day retreat. So it is important that you take care of yourself. This means making sure that you do not come to harm yourself physically or mentally during the retreat.

So if you are doing some physical exercises, don't overdo it and be aware of any limitations or injuries you have. Similarly if you find yourself being overwhelmed or very distressed during a practice, stop doing it and soothe yourself in any way you know works. Rejoin the retreat only when you feel well enough again.

The tutor should give out their mobile number so you can call or text them if you need to – for advice and support during a break.



Session 1

Settle in front of your computer a few minutes before the start of the session. There is no need to say hello or interact. Just enjoy the quiet until the tutor starts the session. OH! and turn your phone OFF.

Breakfast Practice

Use the periods between the formal online sessions to maintain, as best you can, an increased level of attentiveness to what you are doing. Try not to lapse back into regular patterns of checking your phone and listening to the radio.

Enjoy taking time to prepare your breakfast and enjoy eating it mindfully (like the raisin exercise) Pay attention to simple things. Maybe sit and take a look out of the window, really seeing what is there. If you take exercise, make it part of the retreat by bringing mindful curiosity to the activity.



Sessions 2 and 3

Again join each session quietly until the instruction or practice begins.

Practice between the sessions

*“I noticed the effects everywhere. My simple soups, bought beforehand in a final supermarket sweep, tasted like Michelin-starred menus. I was more aware of all around me, picking up on things I’d normally miss”**

The idea is to make the “breaks” part of the retreat rather than see them as separate. There will be no one monitoring you or asking what you have been doing – so it’s up to you.

During a retreat “breaks” are self-guided practice periods. It is a case of “it’s not what you do but the way that you do it”. You may decide to take a walk or do some gardening – whatever you do – bring to it an attitude of mindful curiosity. Notice the flow of sensations, feelings and thoughts as you go along. Even taking a mindful snooze is perfectly acceptable!

Having said it doesn't matter what you do – my recommendation would be to keep away from things we often use to distract ourselves: social media, TV, radio and even books or reading cereal packets!

The evening session

The last session of day will include a formal practice but also the opportunity, for those that want to, to feedback a little about your experience of the day. The idea is to maintain the reflective nature of the day rather than engage in philosophical debate. It is where people on the retreat can acknowledge each other and their silent companionship during the day.

At the end of the day

There is no predicting what you will feel at the end of the day. You may feel calm and energised or you may feel exhausted and frustrated. It is common, however, to feel a level of vulnerability at the end of a retreat – however long it is. For this reason it is a good idea to re-engage with your everyday life in as gentle a way as possible.

So I'd suggest that you don't immediately rush out to a party or turn on a blockbuster film. Some people find it useful to write down something about their experience before it fades in the memory. At least take some time to reflect on the experience.

What next?

*“To give yourself time to disconnect from your devices and reconnect with yourself is to cash a gift voucher at the spa of space. And this is the greatest gift to self you can give, especially now”**

Intensive periods of practice like retreats are a great supplement to a daily practice and informal practices. It is the regular daily practice that will slowly slowly help us reorientate our minds and help us find more peace in our lives.

After a retreat is a good time recommit yourself to regular practice. Retreats often deepen our understanding and can have positive impacts on our daily meditations.

There are now many Mindfulness retreats available online and they will, eventually, take place again in beautiful retreat centres. I hope you will decide to explore what retreats can offer you.

They have enriched my life over the years, and I hope to go on many more.

Bob Chase -

Barge Fiodra – The River Lea - 27th February 2021

mindfulinthecity.co.uk



*Unless otherwise stated, quotes are from James Ware’s article “I did a 60-hour silent retreat in my own flat – lockdown has never felt so good” - Tuesday 19 January 2021 - The Independent

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