

HEAVEN ON EARTH—MY FIRST LONG RETREAT

By

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I have to smile to myself when I think about how the tears streamed down my face at the end of the last sitting meditation. The retreat was ending, but I didn't want it to. As the eight remaining yogis sat in stillness before the teacher, a sudden wave of contentment washed over me, and I realized that for the first time in a very long time, I felt like I had finally come home.

Contentment was the very last thing on my mind ten days earlier when the retreat began. I was scheduled to appear at the peacefully secluded American Bodhi Center near Hempstead, Texas, on a Saturday morning, about a one hour drive from my home in noisy, congested, traffic tangled Houston.

In fact, I had so many circumstances and obligations to fulfill in the world, that I really questioned the sanity of taking off for ten whole days to attend the retreat. Ten whole days away from my struggling, one man operated pest control business. Ten whole days away, in spite of my promise to a sick friend to watch over his business for him while he recuperated from a stroke. Ten whole days away from my 20 year old daughter, who had gotten herself in a fix and needed help. How could any responsible person in his right mind ever consider such a selfish act—to disappear from everyone and all of the 'important' things just when he was needed the most? The closer my departure date became, the more I struggled with that question.

If it weren't for the fact that I had yet another obligation—one to my good friend and retreat sponsor, Oliver Chang—I probably would have cancelled my trip. Several months before, Oliver asked me if I knew how to cook. When I told him yes, he asked if I minded volunteering my cooking services for the retreat. I readily accepted, but later, when I learned that there would be over twenty hungry mouths to feed twice a day, a wave of dread flushed over me. The largest party I'd ever cooked for was seven people—all family—and that was just for one meal on a leisurely Thanksgiving holiday ten years ago. So much for experience,

and so much for peace of mind. Instead of looking forward to over a week of solitude, I was a nervous, somewhat reluctant camper.

But when something is for you, when your time has come to receive a special blessing, there's nothing that can keep it from you, except your own self. On a cold, crisp, mid-December morning, when I pulled my truck into the unpaved parking area of the American Bodhi Center and turned off the engine, I knew that I'd made the right decision. For a brief time, I sat there alone in the truck, soaking in the stunning silence. The chilly morning breezes caressed several wind chimes that hung over a rustic placement of a circular stone table and two wooden benches, and as the chimes gently tinkled their soothing musical magic, the fear and the nervousness I'd felt all week long were mystically washed away. An instant peace filled me, and I let out a deep sigh of relief. Yes. This is where I need to be.

Oliver surprised me when he softly called my name out in the stillness of the morning, and I got out of the truck enthusiastically to greet him. We shook hands and quietly smiled at one another. This being my very first retreat as well as my very first attempt at serious meditation, I had no idea of what to expect or what was expected of me regarding meditation practice, but I could tell from Oliver's demeanor that he was deeply centered inside of himself. I gathered that he must have just finished a sitting. He pointed me silently to the kitchen, and since we'd already visited the center two weeks prior and discussed my kitchen duties, I knew what to do. I unloaded the truck with the groceries I'd shopped for the night before in Houston, and took them to the kitchen.

Much to my surprise and delight, Jan, (pronounced Y-a-h-n) a personable, energetic young man from Switzerland, who was also the Teacher's (Bhante Sujiva) friend and traveling assistant, was already in the kitchen doing some organizing. He had also volunteered his time to help cook on the retreat. We shook hands and quietly joked around about guy stuff as we set about the task of getting the kitchen up and running. Thanks to Jan and his excellent kitchen and cooking skills, all of my lingering fears of not being a success in the kitchen were diffused, and what I thought would be a difficult job suddenly became an easy affair. Now it would be easier to concentrate on my main reason for attending this retreat—to learn how to meditate.

Using words to capture a meditative experience is like using your hands and arms to fly. Like your body, the words plunge quickly to earth, leaving only the experience to float along the wind currents. Sitting with 21 other yogis in complete silence before the compassionate, enlightening personage of Bhante Sujiva is not something that words can adequately describe. Having been raised and taught to view the universe from a Christian perspective, the best description that I can relay to anyone is that each quiet sitting in meditation were some of the holiest moments I've ever known in my lifetime. Whether the kind winter breezes blew through the fluttering leaves on the hundreds of trees surrounding the meditation hall, whether the dogs barked in the distance or the birds sang in cheerful melodies, we sat in silence—in communion with each other—and with the flow of Life around us.

As a beginner, I don't mean to give the impression that my lessons were all perfume and roses. On the contrary, I spent most of my sittings battling with the physical pain of being in one position for an hour at a time. Even when I sometimes switched from sitting cross legged, Indian style on the floor, to a chair, the physical act of sitting still in one position plagued me. At first, I couldn't imagine what anyone got out of this seemingly horrible torture, but I somehow reasoned that it was I, and not they, (the 21 other yogis and Bhante), that needed to be enlightened about this particular problem I was experiencing. With time and with practice, however, my body slowly began to adjust.

When you throw in the breathtaking beauty of clear, starry nights; when you add the mesmerizing chants of thousands of birds passing overhead on clear, cool sunny days; when you experience living on 500 acres of untouched, virgin land surrounding the two trailers we lived and meditated in; when you add wonderful people who have a deep passion for spiritual communion; when you toss in wise counsel and sincere companionship—you can't help but come away knowing that Heaven is right here on this Earth—you just have to know how to get there. This is why I cried on the last day. I'd found a way to Heaven, and I didn't want to leave.

When the retreat was over and I returned to the world, my father asked me what great thing I'd learned about myself, having spent ten days in solitude. I started to think about it to give him an answer, but since I'd spent the past ten days learning to disentangle my brain from thinking so much, I decided to feel the

answer rather than intellectualize it. What came out was something like this: I learned that meditation is not something that you do, it's something that you are. I learned that meditation is a willingness to endure pain for the greater good. I learned that peace is freedom, and that this life is a phenomenal gift. Above all, I learned that the best blessing on this Earth is the experience of it, whether we know it or not.

For the rest of my days I go eagerly to my cushion to commune with the Life that flows through us all...

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