

The Meditation Retreat Manual

IN SEARCH OF
ULTIMATE PEACE



PETER STUCKINGS

THE MEDITATION RETREAT MANUAL

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In Search of Ultimate Peace

By
Peter Stuckings

AEON

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*Dedicated to all meditators everywhere.
May you find ultimate peace in this very life.*

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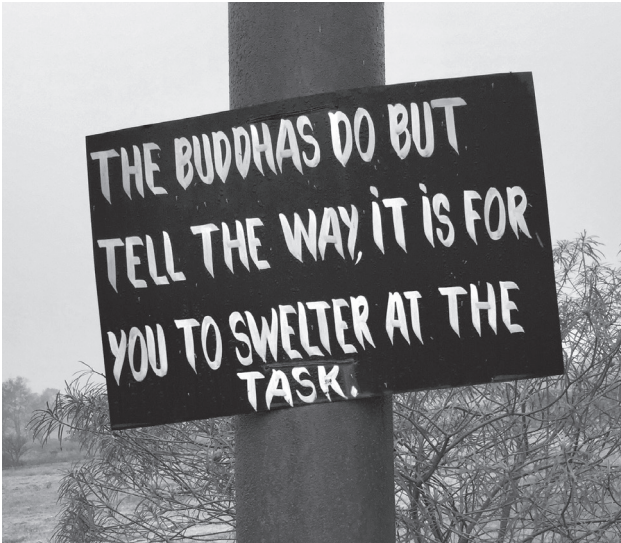
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INTRODUCTION



Sign at the Buddha's birthplace, Lumbini, Nepal

It is no exaggeration that the path of intensive meditation training may turn out to be the most illuminating and rewarding journey of your life. I hope you stick around long enough to see this for yourself because the reasons are not immediately apparent.

From the outside, it makes little sense why people go to a remote place to sit in silence hour after hour, for many days or even months in a row. It would be easy to conclude retreats are all about mystical mumbo jumbo or avoidance of life challenges. In fact, meditation is not a state of shutting down or doing nothing. Despite how static it might

appear, meditation actually involves navigating a path of developmental changes. You could think of it as a complex journey to the heart of the human condition. At times exhilarating, at times painful, the journey is ultimately profoundly rewarding. And along the way there are fascinating landscapes, evolving perspectives, and an eventual destination of sorts.

The landmarks on this journey can be mind-blowing, mind-numbing, heavenly, disturbing, transformative, and more. But—and here is the point of this book—you must walk it for yourself. The discoveries cannot be explained in words that replicate the experience. If someone were to try, the uninitiated would link up those words with old familiar concepts and settle for an understanding that falls short. Meditation shows us precisely that which is obscured from our normal untrained view, so it must be experienced to become known.

If meditation only showed us conditions available in normal daily life, there would be little of interest in it. But with enough practice at what we call purifying the mind, one can arrive at states of peace, stillness, and release that have no comparison in one's life prior to taking up meditation. These experiences can leave us breathless and astonished to discover there is so much more to be felt and known throughout this body-mind complex than we could have imagined. And eventually we may see the greatest of benefits unfold: the overflow of meditation learnings into our daily lives such that we begin to walk a different, more aware path. Again, this is why each of us must undergo the training in order for the fruits to be revealed and lived.

As you might guess, getting to grips with all that one can encounter in the world of meditation training is no walk in the park. And yet the greatest of hindrances we will face are the ingrained habits of mind that we ourselves bring to the task. I'm reminded of the old Zen trope of the teacher standing before his students guiding them to see the brilliance of the moon. But instead of observing the moon, the students are fixated on his pointing finger. You can imagine the teacher's struggle. "There it is," he says, gesturing. "Yes, we see," they reply, nodding at the finger. "No, not that," the teacher counters. He points more emphatically. "There!" "Yes, we understand," the students nod again.

If we are satisfied we know something, the mind has effectively closed the door on the matter, convinced it has no need to search any further. But if what we have settled on is wrong or incomplete, it's

an uphill battle to update that understanding. Such is the perennial problem we face when approaching the Buddha's discoveries about the mind. We are setting out to investigate that which has always been right before our eyes, but has routinely escaped notice. So it serves us well to bring to meditation what the Zen Buddhists call beginner's mind: the approach of assuming nothing and being open to learn anew in every moment. Because understanding is always a work in progress, not a static destination point.

* * *

In this book you will find advice on the questions people come upon when starting out in the practice of intensive meditation. Everything from basics like what to bring on a retreat and how to sit well, to the mental and conceptual challenges commonly faced. It's less of a narrative from start to end and more of a reference text, so feel free to skip to the topics you're interested in.

There are some meditation instructions throughout the book to pique your interest, and recommended information sources in the Further Resources section at the rear. To ensure everyone is on board, I start with the basics and encourage you to find out what's next. And finally, there is a focus on meditation methods with roots in the Buddhist teachings.

Diverse "Buddhisms" abound everywhere from Japan to Sri Lanka and from Tibet to Taiwan, not to mention the offshoots that have taken root elsewhere around the world. The major Buddhist strands are as follows. Note that each of these consists of sub-strands.

- Theravada (South and South-East Asia): the term means Word of the Elders, referring to the tradition's aim to adhere to the earliest extant texts, and features a focus on individual liberation through asceticism and meditation.
- Mahayana (East and North-East Asia): the term means Big Vehicle, and is a later development marked by philosophical investigation, religious observances, and a shift away from individual salvation to a society-wide project of saving all beings.
- Tibetan (or Vajrayana) (Tibetan plateau and northern India): a complex collision between Mahayana strands from India and China with pre-existing indigenous beliefs, marked by philosophical investigation and innovative rituals and meditation techniques.

The main meditation methods you may encounter are as follows, but this list is not exhaustive.

- Vipassana: persistently observing mental and physical phenomena until intuitive insights arise. Traditionally considered part of Samatha, but in the modern age it is increasingly taught as a separate training.
- Samatha: a range of concentration practices that investigate mental and physical states.
- Vajrayana/Tantra: esoteric practices such as mantras and visualizations. Includes Dzogchen techniques of observing the ground of consciousness.
- Zen: a Japanese term derived from the Sanskrit word *dhyāna* meaning meditation, appearing also in Chinese as Chan, in Korean as Son, and in Vietnamese as Thien. The meditation is mostly derived from Samatha with some added East Asian characteristics.
- Combinations, variations, and modern bootlegs of these.

The one feature common to all of these meditation methods is that each one is the only pure, true way to Enlightenment as intended by the Buddha. All the others are inferior corruptions. If you don't believe me, just ask an adherent of each one!

Jokes aside, it helps to be on our guard against attachment to traditions and methods. Long-term meditation practice eventually reveals the basic truth that the mind more or less instinctively knows the way to the ultimate peace. It just needs the opportunity to get there, much like a wild animal in a cage only needs the latch lifted to make good its escape. So it's less important which tradition you start with and more that you diligently do the practice until the way forward is revealed. And of course, we should not shy away from learning what each method has to offer. In the meantime, it is all too easy to get caught up in attachment, analysis, and even argumentation. As you become more familiar with the methods, you will see their underlying assumptions as well as their likely benefits and outcomes, not to mention your own deeper motivations. Then you will be better positioned to choose where to focus your energies.

Anyway, no matter the tradition, meditation retreats tend to share the same basic formula: we remove ourselves from the busy world to a quiet place where we commit to a daily routine of meditation training.

There may also be further activities such as a daily lecture, a teacher interview, or a chanting session.

The practice of retreating harks back to the dedicated training undertaken by monks and nuns in the Buddha's time of the fifth to sixth century BCE. In those days it was common for monastics to strive for intensive meditation training in their daily routines, but it was not always possible. They had chores and duties, as well as a need to keep on the move between kingdoms, districts, and towns in order not to exhaust the patronage and patience of the communities they depended on for food and other material support.

As it turned out, every year they got the chance for focused, committed training. A custom among ascetics at the time was to stay put during the three-month rainy season that usually falls between July and October across northern India, due to the difficulty of travel as well as the danger of damage to budding crops. The Buddha made this sedentary period into a formal custom for the growing population of monastics who followed him. The Pali term for rain, *Vassa* (Sanskrit: *Varṣa*), is still used today for the Rains Retreat, the three-month period when monastics are expected to settle down for meditation and study.

During the *Vassa*, the Buddha's monastic population took up a daily routine of rising early, gathering food donations from nearby communities, and spending the remainder of the day and night in meditation practice. Sometimes a senior teacher, possibly even the Buddha himself, would deliver a lecture to help clarify a technical point or to inspire the trainees with a discourse on the benefits of the practice.

Throughout the twenty-five centuries-long history of Buddhist meditative practices, some lay people also wanted to train seriously in these methods. They typically had to fit the practice into their daily household routines which, if you've ever tried it, is a challenge even for us modern folks with time-saving luxuries like washing machines and microwave ovens.

While dedicated meditation practice among lay people was fairly rare until modern times—that's what the monastic life was for—it grew quickly in the twentieth century in the wake of European colonial upheavals across Asia in the nineteenth century. One obvious example is the changes in Burma. The newly arrived colonial authorities removed the monarchy and thereby cut off the traditional imperial protection of and financial support for monasteries. The monks were forced to turn

to the civilian population which, by the twentieth century, gave rise to a new relationship of interdependence and cooperation. Through regular contact with the community, meditation masters discovered there were many among the population who wished to strive for the highest goals of the practice, previously available only to monks and nuns within the monastic institutions. In the mid-twentieth century, some Asian teachers even began going abroad to teach, while students from around the world travelled to Asia to train.

Throughout these changing times, it is also true that Buddhist meditation methods and their theoretical frameworks have evolved to suit a more lay-oriented mass market. You may hear teachers and schools claiming their method is exactly the way the Buddha taught his followers to meditate. Too much time has passed and too much interpretation has been added to the remnants of his earliest teachings for this to be entirely knowable. Hence, this is why among the world's meditators is a subset of people seeking out the most reliably effective teaching and training approaches and, as you might expect, these are rarely found in mainstream meditation settings.

Nowadays there are countless meditation retreat centres in most Asian countries, and centres have also proliferated elsewhere around the world. As a result, taking time out to go train at a meditation retreat is now within the reach of unprecedented numbers of people. There are no formal limits to who can attend, and these days people of every age and stage of life, and every cultural and religious background are giving it a try.

Around the world, people are discovering that retreats allow for greater intensity of practice. You don't need to prepare meals or go to work, or look after kids or cars or gardens or pets. There may be a few simple chores to perform, but generally you need only concern yourself with joining the training sessions on time. This ensures you get plenty of consistent, uninterrupted meditation time out of each day. A well-run meditation centre can support a schedule of ten to fourteen or more hours of formal training per day. By comparison, most people in the beginning stages of their daily meditation practice at home may find an hour per day a lot to fit in. Add to this the supportive and cooperative environment of a centre where everyone is tacitly sharing the struggles and joys of the journey together, and you can see how a retreat provides us with unparalleled conditions for strong and intensive practice.

For the record, this is not to suggest there is no benefit to keeping up a basic daily practice over long periods. There certainly is. Meditation is all about developing wholesome habits, including persistent effort, so every little bit counts.

People go on retreats for a range of reasons. Some say it is to better understand the mind or themselves. Others go to training in response to a challenging stage in life. Still others are seeking the highest soteriological goals of the traditional meditation pathways. And it's reasonable that some are responding to all of these.

The word retreat is usually taken to mean withdraw, especially from something difficult or dangerous. But according to dictionaries, it can also mean to go to a quiet, safe place. Or to step back from a position of believing something. Or to remove oneself from the busy world to engage in meditative contemplation. I like to think of going on a meditation retreat as engaging with all of these possibilities.

But we should not entertain any illusions that retreats are a breeze. While some meditation retreat centres are luxurious and comfortable—mainly in Western countries—this is not the norm in the traditional Asian settings where monasteries and meditation centres are generally built and maintained with donations, so they may feature basic structures, simple food, and rudimentary facilities. Add to this the fact that you will be required to practice meditation for all the waking hours when you are not eating or doing daily ablutions, separated completely from your typical daily life habits and comforts, and you can see that a degree of adjustment is required.

You might question why traditional retreats are so austere, or even severe in such places as the forest monasteries of South-East Asia. And certainly, by the standards of modern life, it can be a significant challenge. But the reasons are logical enough. Our daily lives in society are overloaded with mental distractions and addictive attachments, as well as stresses and responsibilities, that churn up the mind like a muddy river. Conversely, intensive meditation practice involves settling the mind until it becomes as still and transparent as a crystal-clear pond. So minimising distractions through simple living conditions is central to the whole undertaking.

Even with supportive training conditions, we will quickly discover there's something especially awkward about sitting in silent stillness for hours. The world's quietest place is said to be a sound-proofed

room owned by Microsoft in Redmond, Washington, USA, where the walls absorb all sound, deflecting nothing back to people in the space. Researchers have found the total absence of auditory input means *you* become the sound: your heartbeat, lungs, even the pumping of blood. This removal of external stimuli, and the new focus on our own internal existence, causes such intense discomfort and disorientation that very few people can stay in the room for long. There's an important insight here. Stillness and silence stand in stark contrast to the external noise and disruption that dominate our daily lives, in which we are absorbed in the pursuit of endless entertainments, frivolous distractions, perpetual pleasure-seeking, and fraught displeasure-avoidance. That is, we routinely do everything possible to avoid dwelling in the profound, still, silent awareness of each moment of experience, *as it really is*. The source of this avoidance will likely be revealed on your meditation journey and is one of the most important discoveries we can make about what drives us.

While on retreat, we take advantage of the quiet and solitude to purify the mind. That is, to cleanse it of impurities like anger and lust, stress and worry, and daydreaming and extraneous ruminations. With increased purity, we can cultivate mental skills like concentration and mindfulness, which lead to deep silence, inner peace, and eventually contentment. These wondrous achievements are the foundations upon which the highest of wholesome mental habits can grow: compassion, loving-kindness, joy for the happiness of others, and equanimity. The fruits of meditation training are certainly magnificent and worthy of great effort, but the catch is that there are no shortcuts and no easy ways out.

Although meditation is all about investigating the mind, the mind itself is the most elusive and confounding object of awareness. No matter how hard we try, everything about it seems to evade close examination and comprehension, and all we are left with is questions. What and where and why is the mind? Is it even a thing? To what extent is the mind a transparent representation of the world outside of my experience or to what extent is my experience a figment of the mind's machinations? And is it *my* experience or is there just experience? The more we think about it, the less it seems to make sense.

The good news is that the path of meditation training equips us with the tools of observation as well as concepts and terminology with which to study and discuss what we encounter. I like to think of meditation as a form of empirical investigation. The cushion is my

laboratory, concentration my microscope, and mindfulness is there for observing and measuring.

Through mind training we can access heights of mastery unknown prior to setting out. Just as when we witness the greatest feats of sporting mastery—Simone Biles doing flawless backflips across a gym floor or Roger Federer’s lightning-fast reflexes on the tennis court—we might marvel at the astounding outcomes of their many years of intensive training. But we should also reflect on the mastery and excellence possible if we approach mind training with the same energy and determination. The mind has significant advantages over the body: it is not subject to the constraints of gravity, inertia, wind resistance, friction, or energy scarcity. The mind has no boundaries, it requires no equipment, it is rooted nowhere, it cannot be boxed in or reduced in any way, and it cannot run out of space or time. Admittedly, the brain is physical, with certain structural and functional characteristics. But it is in no way clear to the observer how the brain gives rise to the compelling and complex universe of consciousness that we typically call the mind.

Having said all of that, meditation training reveals to us that there is one big repository of limitations on mental excellence: ourselves. That is, our inhibitions, preconceptions, and unwholesome thoughts. The good news is they are within our reach to influence.

Such intensive mental training was part of the culture of ancient India. The practice pathways and their goals were predicated on the notion that the mind could be trained, could be manipulated—or, more to the point, unmanipulated—could learn new abilities, could be strengthened along certain performance axes, and could go beyond what untrained people assumed were the bounds of the possible, to arrive at a liberated state of one kind or another. Versions of such training are also available today and are best tackled through the intensive retreat format. Regardless of the claims you encounter on the internet, the same progress is not normally possible when staying at home and listening to apps or learning from books. This is especially true for new starters who can benefit enormously from structured practice and personalised input to get a grounding in the discipline and technique.

In contrast to what the ancients knew, nowadays there’s an assumption about the mind that conceals an unhelpful blind spot. We know that physical health requires physical fitness: to be healthy we need to train the body with activities like jogging or cycling or weights. But when it comes to the mind, our culture works on a tacit assumption that

everyone starts from a position of mental health and only succumbs to mental illness in unusual or unlucky circumstances. This is a costly misunderstanding.

The mind, no differently to the body, needs training to become and remain strong and resilient. This might be a little confusing at first. The mind isn't really a thing, like a muscle. And it's not a physical organ, like the heart. Instead, you could think of the mind as a stream of processes, or as a conglomeration of instincts and habits that are constantly in flux. It turns out we can neglect these processes and habits and see a decline in our mental capabilities and well-being. Just as we might spend a lot of time on the sofa and then find our bodies unable to cope with the stress of running for a bus, we can also spend our time wallowing in bad mental habits that weaken our clarity and resolve, and leave us more susceptible to unwise or ineffective responses to challenges. So training the mind can help us develop new habits built on strong foundations.

The Buddhist teachings and training methods also show us the mind is the generator of our moment-to-moment experience of reality. It takes sensory data and spins up a heavily processed virtual reality that completely absorbs our attention. We see ourselves as a person with fixed, unchanging attributes embedded in a place and time, engaged in the self-importance of pursuing conceptual desires, and constrained within a narrow perspective of our place in the world as it appears to us. We experience an unshakeable conviction there is a me here and a you there, and a world of things and people around us. Conceptual relationships arise that we invest ourselves in as if they are absolute truths. And as long as we take those concepts to be truths, they become the rationale for our confident engagements with others and the world. The implication of all of this is that our beliefs, which arise out of nothing more than concepts, can embroil us in all kinds of real-world trouble.

And yet—here comes the spoiler!—all of it is illusory. We spend our entire existence embedded so deeply in this thoroughly convincing machinery that we do not think to investigate how authentic our apparent “reality” really is. Driven forth into the world by these illusory perceptions, we may become delusional and act on anger, hatred, lust, jealousy, confusion, dejection, depression, and many other unhappy possibilities that can spread like an infection to those we come into contact with.

In saying our apparent reality is an illusion, I'm not claiming the world of rocks and trees and people does not exist. The issue is that our experience of the world consists of conceptual constructs and deeply flawed assumptions that serve as an overlay on the raw perceptions, obscuring and distorting them to the extent that we no longer experience reality, but instead our mental constructs of it.

Through intensive meditation's heightened awareness of the microscopic activities of the mind, we begin to see this reality construction happening in real time. After seeing through these cognitive processes, new habits arise and we become aware of a clearer and less mediated version of being present in each moment. Tradition tells us the Buddha found that fully awakening to this state of unfiltered awareness was profoundly liberating. It was also irreversible because, once an illusion is busted, it cannot be unbusted: that is, you cannot return to holding a conviction that something is real when you have seen it is false. In English we typically call this accomplishment Enlightenment. Tradition suggests that the extraordinary power and value of his discovery were obvious to him because he spent the remainder of his life—a whole forty-five years—devoted to teaching it to all comers.

The matter of Enlightenment in Buddhist meditation is large and warrants its own chapter. While people seek out meditation training for a range of reasons, Enlightenment (or awakening or other ill-defined spiritual attainments) is a major and important one. We will look at it in detail later.

On a related note, the project of meditation is sometimes misunderstood in the West. It is approached with the self-help expectation of alleviating psychological discomfort or distress, or with the goal of becoming better adjusted and more successful by the standards of society. But Buddhist meditation can actually help you see that the psyche doing all that yearning and suffering isn't as substantial or central to your existence as you might think. People going to meditation to "get" something for themselves are missing the point entirely. Instead, there is only the letting go of an illusion of fixed, permanent self-identity. After this liberative realisation, suffering is likely to be experienced in a quite different way.

It must be stressed this book is not about faith-based religion or mystical beliefs. You do not need to buy into any dogmas in order for meditation to work for you. Just turn up, do the training, and you will see

for yourself. For the record, I do not consider myself religious, or beholden to one orthodoxy or another. I do not believe in or advocate clinging to a particular tradition or method, and I do what I can to seek only what is wise and beneficial. Admittedly, this is always a work in progress.

One does not need to be religious to recognise that the Buddha's teachings, as we have them, are among the highest watermarks of human wisdom and therefore deserve sincere study. But here's the catch: he taught an experiential path that opens up direct insights, rather than mere philosophical speculations. Hence why *doing* the meditation is central to this entire project. All else is distraction. Sure, theoretical study is helpful, but only to support our practice. If it grows to become more than that, we have put the cart before the horse. Besides, between retreats there is always time to read and learn. It is not necessary to put training aside to do this.

Over the years, I have encountered an explosion of people online and out there on the trail eager to go further but who are beset by questions. After countless emails and conversations with seekers from every part of the globe, I put together this book to address the most common concerns raised, overheard, or anticipated. I also took the opportunity to pepper a few opinions throughout that were gained through personal experience.

The sole aim of this book is to encourage you to overcome your hesitations. If you are uncertain about how to begin or how hard it might be, I have set out to answer those questions and resolve those doubts. If after reading this book you go and complete a meditation retreat, my efforts will have been more than repaid.

A very sincere thank you to the friends who have given immensely helpful feedback. Without your help, this manuscript would have remained lurking in an obscure corner of the internet. Deep gratitude is due to Josep Maria Prat Vilà, Benoit Anand, and David Pandt for their time and thoughtful critiques. While their input was of great benefit, I take full responsibility for the views expressed and mistakes herein.

You'll also find a listing of meditation centres around Asia at my blog, *Places To Meditate*.

May you find in these pages the inspiration to go in search of ultimate peace.

Peter Stuckings
March 2023
Sri Lanka

Embark on a rewarding and illuminating journey, with this step-by-step guide to making the most of meditation retreats

The Buddha's teachings are among the highest watermarks of human wisdom so it is natural that we want to learn more. But there's a catch...

What he taught was not just a set of concepts for us to ponder. He directed us to walk an experiential pathway leading to thoroughly transcendent and transformative breakthroughs. Despite modern promises of quick and easy outcomes via apps and online gurus, the most effective way forward is still the intensive meditation retreat.

Within these pages, readers will find everything they need to know to make progress on the retreat trail, including:

- How to navigate the cultures and traditions
- The mental and physical experiences along the way
- What to bring and not to bring
- What to expect of the food and sleep conditions

There are also sections on how to sit well, advice on the main meditation techniques, breakdowns of what intensive meditation does to us, and lots more. The book works as a reference text, so readers can dip in and out of topics that interest them most.

Peter Stuckings comes from Australia and has lived around Asia for most of his life due to a fascination with the region's ancient wisdom traditions. He obtained a Masters Degree in Buddhist Studies from Hong Kong University, and also completed Pali language studies in Sri Lanka and with Oxford University. To make the most of the region's training opportunities, he spent some years hopping from country to country and monastery to monastery, which was the inspiration for this book. Nowadays he has taken the robes and dwells as a monk in the forests of Sri Lanka. His blog, called *Places To Meditate*, lists meditation centres of good standing throughout the region.

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