

Youth Retreat 2005

[Published with thanks to the youths who kindly gave permission]

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In this retreat I remembered how to live
Deliberately, but without deliberation
For too long I have tried to deliver
But without the aim of deliveration
I learned how difficult it was to do the things
I did everyday
Eating, sleeping, walking, sitting, moving
The action was there, but the mind had gone away
To other things – the next moment or moments before
To people I couldn't stand, and people I adore
I began to realize how my thoughts affected
my body, particularly the centre of my chest
A terrible tightness, a constriction in the breath
All caused by my mind – this agitated mind
Can find no rest
Of course there was pure physical pain like
the throbbing in my brain, and when it's given
a name it's called a migraine
But when I just think of it as sensation
it becomes a heartbeat in my head,
a pulse in my skull
When I accept that it's not forever the pain
begins to dull
I have learned there is pain without suffering
I have also learned there is suffering without pain

Pain is a natural healthy condition of the body
Suffering is unnatural and caused by the mind
So I must accept the pain
And leave the suffering behind.

~ ~ ~

Crap. The Venerable has told us to talk to one another for this exercise, just when I was really getting into the noble silence and relieved to be free of all the idle chatter in the world. Then I realized that the noble silence hasn't been so noble or silent – there's a bloody televised drama going on inside my mind, well into its two millionth episode, but no-one is watching the TV – all the actors are just trying to outdo each other in the melodrama and grand sweeping narrative. All of them try to be in centre stage, and they

all want to be furnished with the best setting. Who's going to look at me if I'm in a crappy white-set background? Give me the interior or the Titanic with chandeliers dripping with crystals like a running tap; hell, even give me a dark rat-infested graffiti-walled alleyway so I can at least face a bit of suffering with a broken bottle top in the arm.

Oh this suffering is stupid. It's gross. Who put such violent crap on the TV? It's senseless and needless. I don't have to see this. I'm going to change the channel. Oh, here's one I do like. Good setting, sweeping scenery, generous camera angles, although the script is a little shaky. No matter, I am a master playwright, I'm going to change the script, then I'll put myself in it. Some characters are also unnecessary. Their acting lacks conviction.

OK, so I've furnished my script and drama with everything that a play could possibly need to entertain me. Wow, what a good show. Superb acting from the leads. Bit sad, a bit bittersweet, a bit exciting, a bit scary, a bit of everything, but most of all...well it's into its 200 millionth episode. I reckon it's also a bit to long. I am surprised my audience hasn't left. Wait a sec, I also realize I'm tired of it. It's exhausting to watch this.

Change the channel then.

No.

Why not?

I'm sick of the other channels. Your acting bores me.

Well have you tried all the channels?

Yes.

Then let's turn the TV off and go outside. It is sunny there.

OK

Oh no.

What?

I don't know how to turn it off.

Well, you know how to change channels. Then you should know how to turn the dumb thing off!

I don't know. I really don't know!

Pull the plug then!

No! You idiot! Don't do that.

Are you afraid to?

Yes. I don't know what will happen.

Then just walk away from the TV.

Good idea.

~ ~ ~

Dear All,

This is the third retreat I have attended with the Reverend. After completing the last one I wanted very much to attend the next one but circumstances seemed to prevent me.

However, probably due to my strong mind power at the last second, the situation changed and I was able to come which makes me very happy.

I consider myself very lucky here in Sydney to meet people who practise the path so well, which is a great encouragement to me. Even though one is religious, we still need to practise the dharma as a group as it reinforces one's belief. Before coming to Australia, I stayed some time in the USA, and since I didn't encounter anybody who was even remotely interested in Buddhism, it was very hard to practise the dharma and hence I realise the truth of one of the Buddha's sayings which I heard recently. Forgive me if I don't repeat it exactly as it was said since I didn't write it down. But as far as I can remember in my words the Buddha said to Ananda when he said a Kalyanna Mitra (a dharma friend) is half of the path to attaining enlightenment and the Buddha corrected him and said, "Ananda, it's not half but the whole of the pathway to enlightenment." So at this point I would like to let everybody know my gratitude to the Reverend and DDM for making this retreat possible and to all of you for being just here.

The questioning of how life is fulfilled is something that I have been asking myself for quite some time and so far without any success at all. So far I have been lucky in my worldly life, I have attained my ambitions relatively easily but also come to the realization that the happiness gained from anything material is not long lasting. A thing lasts for a few days or almost a week and then the mind is again restless and wanting to achieve something more. The question of what I want to achieve in life is something that has been bothering me for quite some time and making me restless. I like the religion a lot and I have often thought a lot of being a priest but I am not sure that at this point in my life whether it is the right choice for me. I think at this point the best way is to practise the dharma daily and see where it takes me.

The other thing that crossed my mind is how little gratitude we have for the daily necessities of life and how we take everything for granted. On Wednesday the Reverend talked about gratitude, being grateful for the food we eat, the shelter we have and for the people who work hard to make that all possible. Losing power last night and being cold made me realise how much we take for granted simple things like heating and lighting and for that I am grateful. I think everybody would be a lot happier if they view life in a more positive attitude and be grateful for the little that they have instead of focusing on what they don't have. For instance, last night I felt cold, but simply thinking of the thousands who lost their houses in the Tsunami made me grateful for the roof over my head and that I am not out in the cold wind. Just that realization enabled me not to feel cold and I think one of the most important things that I will take away from this retreat is to be grateful for all the things I have. The other thing is to practise the dharma daily as that will one day enable me to realise what I want to do with my life because at this point I don't know what to do.

~ ~ ~

Before I came to the retreat I meditated for relaxation without any philosophical or religious background, and only now and then – not on a regular daily basis. I have not

attended a retreat before and thought it would be a meditation course and would be beneficial to improve my meditation skills. What I got was not a meditation course but rather a course about life, covering every aspect.

The retreat covered various aspects.

I was always looking forward to the Dharma talks which were inspirational and encouraging. Reverend Guo Jun introduced us to Buddhism and answered practical questions from the participants. He spoke with profound wisdom. The talks answered many of my philosophical and personal questions in a logical, convincing way which satisfied my intellect. However, Reverend Guo Jun always emphasized the importance of practical experience through meditation and mindfulness. At the beginning of the retreat I could not grasp the relevance of this practical experience. However, Reverend Guo Jun's wisdom, his tender and loving charisma which is hard to put into words, generated in me a great faith in his words and actions. This faith helped me to overcome hindrances in my meditation practice, such as pain in the knees and back, by trusting that we did exactly the right thing. Most importantly, through meditation at the end of the retreat everything we had spoken about came together and made perfect sense.

I learned that happiness is not dependent on the outside world. No partner, no job, no money, nothing can make us happy but ourselves. It is our attitude in life which we are able to choose. If we mindfully experience the precious present moment and be one with what we are doing. To be aware that the present moment is all we've got. To taste the flavours of the things we eat, feeling them on our tongue. I learned to walk, to hear, to eat, to see. To see the sun and the earth in a mandarin, to see everything in everything and everybody in everybody. I realized that happiness lies in simpleness, pureness. I learned that a wise life comes from a clear mind.

Moreover, I appreciated the daily yoga exercises. I have the impression I can feel every part of my body again. I feel flexible and aware of my body. Reverend Guo Jun described the prostration and its meaning to us. Before I attended the retreat I thought I would not bow to three golden statues. After the Reverend explained the meaning of prostration, I appreciate the beauty of this symbolic gesture and deeply bow to values of wisdom and generosity.

Throughout the retreat I realized the significance of being within a group of people with similar values. In the material Western world it is often difficult to resist materialistic values imposed upon us by society. Being told that a good career and financial security is an important part of life often causes an incongruence with my own values. How encouraging it is for me to be around spiritual people!

At the end of the retreat I felt rich, in equilibrium and full of happiness. I could not wait to come home to bring all into practice in my daily life. Now, almost one week after the retreat has finished I am still so happy. I experienced that when we radiate love, it is reflected back to us. I meditate and do yoga exercises on a daily basis. However, despite all the positive feedback it is difficult not to fall back into old habits. I realize that I am

sometimes not mindful and my thoughts are far away from the present moment. Once I read any habit is created by continuously repeating a pattern for only three months. I am determined to live a Buddhist lifestyle – make it habitual. To support myself I decided to place little reminders around me; in my handbag, on my bedside table, and so on.

I talked with many friends about my retreat. Many of them were very interested, though some revealed how much suspicion and misunderstanding exists regarding Buddhism and meditation. There are so many people whom I wish deeply from my heart to have experiences similar to those I had and to discover Buddhism for themselves. One of the powerful things Reverend Guo Jun said in the Dharma talks was that we cannot convert people to Buddhism. The wish to change their lives must come from within them. However, by living a mindful, peaceful and loving life and by improving ourselves to become a better person we can create an interest in Buddhism.

I hope one day I will live in a way that helps other people to discover and experience the beauty and wisdom of Buddhism. I am deeply grateful to having found my path and I bow to all people enabling this.

~ ~ ~

Hello,

There are many parts of myself which I don't like very much. I am 25 now and as I have gotten older and 'wiser' and more experienced in life (i.e. set in my ways), I have told myself that it is best just to accept these faults because nothing much can be done about them.

I do not want to be a saint or save innumerable sentient beings nor in truth love them all equally – nor would my fiancée! I feel that is much too large a burden to take upon my narrow shoulders. But I would like to be more pleasant around those close to me, so that I can love them more and cause them less suffering.

When I return home I will maintain the daily sitting – if nothing else comes of it, it's a good excuse to get up at a godly hour in the morning.

Ven Guo Jun has much wisdom for his age and I wish him success in his path – as I do everyone else here.

I love books and fiction and reading, and do not intend to give them up any time soon. They can give us many conversationally useful insights into life - this is not to be disparaged.

I am tired of self-righteousness as I myself am a master of it – I cannot bear it in others – perhaps that is something to work on in myself.

I still can't appreciate wallaby and wombat shit not do I particularly want to feel at one with it.

Some know better than you and others just think they do.

My discipline is poor and I have a memory of it being sturdy and steadfast as an early teen – I feel I must retain this aspect of my nature.

I love beating people – being better than them – as I am sure this value has been taught to me for most of my life – it is unlikely I have the desire or will power to change this – I enjoy it – but I must therefore accept defeat when it comes (often unfortunately..)

‘Holiness’ annoys me – I know it’s just a concept which through mindfulness I could not react to - but I must work on this- then again in normal life one rarely encounters ‘holiness’ anymore. Why does it annoy me – because I once acted in this way (at least resembling it – and it did not work out pleasantly – unresolved feelings)

Success and winning are paramount to me – does that mean I will ultimately feel a failure? It depends how I define success along the way.

Pleasure or pain, come what may. Thank god I’m alive. Life is good. Preferably pleasure though.

~ ~ ~

Dear friend,

After the Mitra Conference, I attended a 5-day meditation retreat.

This was my first long retreat.

Before I arrived I was a bit afraid of how it might be. Not knowing much, I even thought ‘maybe we will be asked to sit and meditate for 3 hours and more’.

Of course it was not like that although sitting was quite hard sometimes. Especially on the second day I wondered: “Why am I doing this?” The weather is so nice. I could have stayed in Sydney and done some sightseeing. We are only sitting in the darkness and I am bored.”

But in the afternoon we went out to do walking meditation in the sun and also the teacher talked about exactly this feeling that I had. He seemed to know my thoughts. That impressed me.

I always look forward to his dharma talks.

He often talked about things that I already thought of but which have not been clear to me yet. His teachings were always reasonable and easy to understand. Especially the mindfulness practices showed me many bad sides of my past life. Therefore, I want to

try to live more mindfully from now on. Hopefully I can also help my family by doing this.

Also my meditation practice improved.

Although I was distracted by scattered thoughts in most of the sittings, I had one where I could keep my attention on my breath the whole time.

This experience encouraged me to practise further and practising felt easier afterwards.

At the third day the teacher changed our day schedule and we were allowed to sleep longer and have longer breaks. I was very glad when I heard that and I went into my sleeping bag after lunch, forgetting that I had to do the dishwashing. After about one hour I got up and felt very drowsy in the afternoon.

When I realised that, I felt very sorry and was angry at myself. Knowing that this would not change anything, I decided to put even more effort on the mindfulness practice and the meditation.

The food was fully vegetarian, probably even vegan and it was cooked without spices (and sometimes even without salt).

At the beginning it was hard for me since I was a fan of good and tasty food, as you know. Nevertheless, the food was very healthy and when you tried to taste the different ingredients you could find a lot of different tastes. So eating this kind of food increased my sense of taste and I hope to be able to use this in my cooking.

The place we stayed at is situated in the forest, with a wide grassy area around. The forest was full of life, filled with birds' voices. Every afternoon there were wallabies (they are small kangaroos) and wombats around. Being afraid of us, the wombats ran away as soon as they saw us but the wallabies came to the house to be fed.

All together I am glad to have attended this retreat.

Maybe I can find a teacher at home and do more retreats.

For now, I look forward to returning to my daily life, hoping to be more mindful every day.

~ ~ ~

I want to tell you of my weekend.

The retreat itself was very peaceful (most of the time). I left home on Monday before 8am to pick up K then drove to Strathfield to meet the others. I guess I was in a 'relaxed' state, looking forward to a week without anything to do. All five of us in the car seemed to be happy, listening to L's stories. We didn't seem to have a care in the world. I wasn't too sure what time we were expected to arrive at Wingello, but thought it should be before noon because others had set off from the City around the time we left. Nevertheless when we realized Wingello was passed Bundanoon, we thought we should

visit Santi Forest Monastery. We had a fun car ride to the caves then decided to have lunch at the café at Bundanoon. I had mentioned perhaps we should call someone to inform them we were late, but we didn't, whether it is because there was no reception or we simply thought another half hour added to being already late would not matter. Sometimes I get anxious in these situations, but seems like I'm only nagging like a mother and people don't appreciate that.

Nevertheless, I felt a sense of guilt when I realised that people were worried about us. When we arrived I was in a sense slightly happy the 5-day retreat had turned into a 4-day retreat (half day on Monday and half day on Friday). But now as I sit here, I feel I need more practice, just like a child learning to swim yet sent off to do a lap of the pool. Well, I guess that's slightly over exaggerating! I have been out in the big world before, it's just whether these few days will leave a marking on my daily activity to be mindful only time will tell.

I did buy a cushion at the Conference, so I'll vow to practise daily and put the cushion as well as this week's experience into practice.

It is refreshing to see the Reverend being such a young person to have such wisdom. I certainly hope when I reach that age I will mature and continue to be more compassionate and wise.

I guess that is my aspiration. A few of us at the Conference who live near each other have decided to organize a weekly sitting to encourage one another in the practice, so I am looking forward to that.

Specific things about the Retreat didn't bother me too much. My sittings did fluctuate. The first day my mind was very scattered. On the second day it was less though I could feel the pain in my legs. I knew I had overcome this previously so persisted; then I noticed the pain in my back more, but I knew this too will go away (even though not physically, definitely in my mind).

I didn't mind the early wake up time and I realized I don't eat as much – generally at work I would snack.

I thought the noble silence was helpful in stilling the mind and to be mindful of our every action. Mindfulness while eating gave me a whole different experience of how to be appreciative, though at times I think it would mean so much more time in your day just would be spent eating!

The exercises were light, but I can see how it can help in sustaining the body. At times I think my body is weak and will wither away before I am prepared – just the soreness in my back at times seemed unbearable.

The circle talks have opened my eyes though certain things I have put aside for now and will verify when I experience those situations in the future.

I had been warned by previous participants of Rev Guo Jun's retreat of the 'who am I' questioning session. I had felt it was not productive at first, but realised if I want to improve my communication skills, it starts by attentive listening without prejudices. When it was my turn to answer, though I had thought of this question many times before, talking about it made me realize the importance of my practice and it was like renewing my aspirations on how to make my life fulfilling.

The understanding of prostrations was good to know, though during the exercise of continuous prostrations it was hard to have this in mind, as the body after a while is continuously screaming 'Master, please let us stop!' Nevertheless, I had a good sleep straight after.

I guess I know that there are many things I will take away from this retreat. I just hope the 'condition' is right for me to remember the things I have practised these few days.

It is comforting to know everyone can change – I can be more patient, I can learn to communicate better and I can be mindful at every moment and hence find peace at every moment and in that way every moment of life will be fulfilling.

~ ~ ~

Initially, prior to the retreat, I found myself having some expectations of the retreat. I could not help making associations with the previous retreats I had attended. Upon arrival at the temple and shortly after the commencement of the retreat, I told myself to be a decent retreatant who was going to set some achievable goals according to my objectives. I was reasonably certain that observing noble silence would be of importance and I would uphold the guidelines and rules handed down by the teacher.

Honestly I had some doubts about Rev Guo Jun's way of leading the retreat and interestingly enough, being silent for the first 2 days made me feel somewhat lonely, rather agitated, frustrated and sceptical. I realized that my mind had not at all settled to the retreat environment. I clearly viewed my own unpleasant thoughts but eventually understood that these doubts, scepticism, endless questioning thoughts and unwholesome/negative assumptions became great obstacles and they were simply perceived as hindrances to my practice.

I'm very well aware of the fact that I hadn't actually accomplished the objective previously set according to my own standards but these last few days have made me reflect on who I am, my past deeds, my character, my aspiration etc and have also enabled me to step aside from all these worldly disturbances and allow myself to just be with the rest of the retreat participants, listen to the teachings and practise. I've been learning to dwell in the present and let go of my past and future temporarily, if not permanently. I also learnt about the beauty of forgiveness in terms of letting go of my unwholesome thoughts and cultivating the attitude of acceptance without remorse. As a

matter of fact, forgiving myself with total sincerity and genuineness of a forgiving heart is not as difficult as it seems.

My meditation practice hasn't really improved but I don't put the blame on anyone, neither do I blame myself for not having put in enough effort or not enforcing discipline upon myself. But rather, I've the notion of accepting the 'real me' and treating this retreat as a stepping stone. From here, I hope to proceed with diligence and patience so as to better my quality of life in the future. In so doing, my life will be more fulfilling. Mindfulness practice in daily life is a gradual process that needs to be cultivated. I know myself and I realize that due to my laziness and a lack of motivation and endurance, I often get carried away with my worldly and potentially negative deeds. However, I don't feel bad about them since I know that deep down I'm a Buddhist who will try my best to follow the path and if I could just open the curtain that blocks my heart, I will be able to see the intrinsic nature of my mind, which is supposedly luminous.

Much of my sitting meditation practice during the retreat has been spent on criticism and drowsiness but I've also learnt so much from Rev Guo Jun not only through his words of wisdom but also observing his manner and attitude to life. Towards the end of the retreat I could feel his compassion and his willingness to serve others in his own unique skilful way for the purpose of walking the journey to liberation. Thank you very much for your kindness, Venerable.

~ ~ ~

Dear Venerable Guo Jun,

Thank you so much for holding this five- day retreat for us. Through this retreat, I learn the valuable lesson of how to breathe, and more importantly how to enjoy the breath.

When the fresh air was breathed in, through the lungs, spreading throughout the whole body, I was so surprised at the relaxation, the joy and the peace of mind such simple movement can give me! I closed my eye, felt the air going in and out, the sun, the trees, the crystal grass, the birds' sounds, the gentle breeze of the wind, the smell of the great earth, all of these seemed to be breathed into my body as well; it cleaned up the mind with its purity.

For a short period, my mind seemed to slow down to the pace of every breath, and I started to realize the food had such a sweet taste, it is so delicious and I am so lucky to have this food! I remember the Venerable once asked whether when we eat the apple, do we taste the sunshine, the air, the water, do we know where the apple comes from. Now I seem have a little understanding of what the Venerable was asking.

When the mouthful of food is swallowed, all of the nutrition, the energy becomes part of my body. Where does this energy come from? They come from the sunshine, the water, the soil, the hard work of the farmer. All of these now become part of my body, gives me the energy and warmth to survive. As a sentient being in this world, no matter what form

we are - the trees, the animals, the great earth - we are so closely related to each other. We are part of the nature, part of the universe!

At the thought of this, I feel so grateful, to this beautiful environment, to the temple, to Ven Guo Jun, to the volunteers and to all of us, so I can have this opportunity to enjoy the breath, enjoy the peacefulness at this moment.

Finally I come to realize that, the purpose of life should not be limited to my own happiness, because as a sentient being, we are not separated from each other as we think we are.

Thanks to all.

