

Excerpts from:

Dawning of Clear Light: A Western Approach to Tibetan Dark Retreat Meditation by Martin Lowenthal. 2003

p. xv to xvi:

Retreats in darkness have been used by all the great spiritual traditions for thousands of years as a method for tapping deep clarity, accessing sacred wisdom, connecting with the divine, and training to transform the body-mind system into a manifestation of wisdom.

Dark retreats are both a setting for doing meditation practice and a specific practice environment. In the dark, the seamless unity in of space provides an environment for realizing the seamless unity of experience. The thoughts that arise are clearly the product of the differentiating conceptual mind and their transient, insubstantial nature is more apparent. The dark provides a profound opportunity to recognize our true nature and realize that our experiences are simply reflections of that nature. The resulting clarity can lead to the realization of profound wisdom, unshakable presence, spontaneous freedom from our mental/emotional habits, transformation of the ordinary into wisdom, and abiding in the state of Clear Light.

The dark is a kind of womb in which to grow into a new way of being. The particular advantages of the dark are many. The rest for our eyes, weary from overstimulation in our visually oriented world, promotes an overall relaxation of body and mind. Living in the dark changes the body chemistry, particularly the pineal, pituitary, thalamus, and hypothalamus glands. The less frequently used senses of hearing and touch expand in importance as we mindfully operate in ways adapted to functioning without the use of sight. The life is simple, allowing for more time and effort to be concentrated on practice. Without the simulation of external light, the conditions are improved for seeing the inner lights, and it is easier to observe the thought patterns that arise out of the internal dynamics of our own minds. The visions and thoughts in the dark tell us what life is like in the unnoticed regions of our being. And the darkness is both intimate and boundless simultaneously.

p. 3-5:

The purpose of such retreats is to relax into the nature of our own being, allowing the mind to discover its natural awareness. In this relaxation we discover the essential qualities of authentic presence, inner lights and visions, the energies of aliveness, silence, and listening, and sacred wisdom. In time we adopt an open heart posture of praise, gratitude, love, compassion, and peace. To find that relaxation and experience that wisdom means confronting and transcending our core fears, unspoken longings, and patterns of denial and addiction.

In a dark retreat, the play of the body mind is exposed more clearly, without the presence of the usual multitude of external stimuli. External darkness becomes the screen for the performance of the internal theatre of images, stories, and reactions.

As we relax and practice free of distractions, the energy of aliveness and all its embodiment is revealed and amplified. All of our physical, mental, and emotional patterns can be seen clearly. We also can more readily sense the flow of energy in the body, the energy field of presence, and

the qualities we share with all of the existence. The wisdom qualities of “being” become more self-evident.

The dark retreat is a safe space to practice and accelerate our relaxation into the sense of ease with the nature of being (natural of mind). For many, doing even a short dark retreat can bring about a significant shift in their lives, revealing another way of being, of relating to life, and of being present with oneself and one's own mind. We gradually enter into ourselves more completely, at the same time, and into all beings.

p. 6-8:

... Light is truly wondrous and transformative. The problem is the trivialization and often the demonization of the dark. The dark represents the unknown, what we cannot understand, what we fear, what we repressed and do not want to look at, what is uncomfortable, what is mysterious, and most prominently, death. It is often seen as the home of evil and sin, the source of violence, destruction, depression, and madness, and the destination of all who would remain ignorant.

... This denial of the fear of darkness leads to addictions that keep us from experiencing the discomfort and pain of death. We numb ourselves with food, alcohol, and drugs, are we seek distraction through constant stimulation and entertainment. These habits are also fuel the inevitable explosion of violence, depression and madness that result from repression and indulgence, and the societal attempts to control such outburst.

... [there is a] necessity of descending into the darkness to receive the gifts of wisdom and the blessing of the struggle with death and grief. This journey reveals our authentic relationship to the divine.

p. 14-15:

According to Parmenides, we are carried on the journey by divine forces, not by willpower or effort, although these may be important to start. Once we have prepared, we give ourselves over and are taken straight to where we need to go. At the same time, it is the strength of longing, a deep passion or desire, that determines how far we can go. “The longing is what turns us inside out until we find the sun and the moon and stars inside.”

Being in touch with our deepest longings and working with them, rather than fleeing from them or trying to escape them, is one of the tasks in spiritual work. Our longing is so deep and that nothing that we consume - food, things, relationships, our experiences - can ever contain it or satisfied it.

Sometimes this haunting appears as sadness, discouraging us from everything we think of wanting. Our reaction is to run from this pain and grief and fight it with anger and/or withdrawal. It may even feel insane as we experience the hollowness when we ignore our deepest voice calling us. The problem is not the sadness; it is they're running from the sadness and the fear of inquiry, deeper into the dark unknown of our own soul.

To the Pythagoreans of ancient Greece and the teachers of in eastern Traditions, the Sun, the moon, and the stars were reflections or creations of the invisible light of the heart, or the ultimate nature of all beings. This was often characterized as an underworld because there was the realization that we cannot ascend without going down to the depths. We cannot comprehend the vastness of our own expanse without knowing the boundless nature of the inner experience.

p.63:

[Doing a darkness retreat allows one the time to not just glimpse or touch on the deeper places, but to dwell there in a way that is nourishing, strengthening, and renewing. This is true of a daily meditation practice and it is amplified tenfold in a darkness retreat.]

p. 117-118:

Although we'd like to feel alive and at home and all aspects of life - physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual - we tend to treat the world as a barrier and a problem. In fact, the problem is not the world, it is our own habits of thinking and feeling, likes and dislikes, which are distracting, confusing, and reactive. In our habitual way of being and doing, we often experience life as a prison in which we are doing time rather trying to avoid fears, satisfied longings and struggle with confusion and boredom.

... We live in a reality made up of mental constructs of perceptions, assumptions, beliefs, processes, and identities that grow out of our reaction to life and do not reflect reality, things as they are.

This personally constructed reality makes up our reactive habit body, the mental, emotional, and physical habits which we develop over the course of life.

The body of habits formed in early life were based on the limited cognitive capacity and the needs of a child, and must be outgrown and reformulated if we are to mature and move through the stages in passages of life.... Spiritual teachings work from the premise that a core of wisdom and beneficial intention is basic to the human design and that we can become free of our reactive structures. This core is not adopted or imposed; rather it, it is discovered and nurtured as part of our growth and maturation.

p. 142;

Lopon Tenzin Namdak, commenting on Darkness Retreats, made distinctions between *personal* darkness retreats, dark retreats oriented around the *recognition of the clear light* of the natural state, and dark Retreats that prepare the practitioner for the six *bardo* states that followed death.