

TEA & MEDITATION SELF-COURSE

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Shen had the good fortune to do two self-courses this year: one while we were in Yunnan in May and one recently in October with guests. These retreats are paving the way for what we hope will be many scheduled tea and meditation retreats at Tea Sage Hut and our future Center, Light Meets Life. In fact, we are setting up our first retreat this September. In the meantime, Shen shares some advice for organizing your own self-course with a focus on tea and meditation. Taking time to retreat at least annually can have a very positive impact on our overall health and well-being, and incorporating tea into a retreat always helps soothe the process.

Creating the time and space to form positive habits is actually the most important element in positive change, and having the time and space to drink tea and meditate all day is a rare privilege, indeed. One of the most important and challenging things I have done to deepen my tea practice here at the Tea Sage Hut was a self-guided, silent tea and meditation retreat. I am very fortunate because this is about the best place on Earth to conduct such a retreat; it is a Zen and tea center, after all. It is easy enough to say, “Tea and Zen are one flavor,” but just try to put that into practice. What does it even mean—the taste of Zen or the posture of tea? An intensive retreat like this creates an intimacy between the two so close that one starts to overlap with the other. You do not need some sort of philosophical understanding of this, nor to live in a tea and Zen center, and you certainly do not need ten days for such a retreat. These are all ideals, not constraints on doing a tea and meditation retreat yourself. In this article, I would like to share what went into organizing such a retreat to make it accessible to everyone, even if you only have one or three days. Even a half-day retreat can be great!

What does a tea and meditation retreat look like?

I have done one-, three-, seven-, and ten-day, self-guided, silent tea and meditation retreats. The number of days is really up to you, but the longer the better. As you can imagine, your days will consist of waking up early, drinking tea, meditating, eating and sleeping (also cleaning and cooking, unless you have someone to help you, which is ideal). This might sound amazing, and it is, but like any intensive retreat, it will also come with its fair share of challenges along the way. It is not a holiday or a time to relax, but rather a time to let challenges arise in a controlled environment that is conducive to facing them and working through them. It is the challenging days that offer the greatest potential for growth and transformation. Growth is always outside the comfort zone. That does not mean you purposely make yourself uncomfortable. Celebrate the times when you are comfortable and consciously work through the times when you are not. A meditation retreat is an excellent time to observe how much we fluctuate between comfort and discomfort and then to reflect on what that means with respect to our everyday lives.

How do I organize my own retreat?

You will want to have your entire retreat very organized. The schedule will be the structure that holds your retreat together to keep things running smoothly and on time. Things can change a lot, depending on how many people are attending the retreat or helping out. In fact, some of you might be in a situation where you are doing the retreat around other people who are not involved at all and are just living their daily lives (perhaps a spouse or roommate, for example) who understand what you are doing but are not participating. In any case, the more people involved, the more organized the retreat has to be, and everything must be communicated very clearly before going into silence. Wu De often says that we must learn to love discipline, treating the schedule as an ally, rather than an enemy to some idea of egoic freedom.



茶 Baisao was an eighteenth-century tea sage whose bright spirit illuminates our tradition in more than name alone. A Zen monk for most of his life, at the age of forty-nine he traded in his robes for what was paradoxically the more Zen-infused life of a roadside peddler of tea. His bowls were steeped in the ancient and priceless spirit of tea, unclouded by money, theory, ritual or even mind itself—a spirit from before the first fingers plucked the first leaves. And those who came by his wayside hut just might have passed by the old man so strangely donning the crane robes of an ancient Daoist hermit, but for the way the spirit twinkled invitingly in his eyes or the softness of his hands as he poured his tea into worn and cracked bowls. And after such a bowl, the passerby left changed somehow, though perhaps not able to grasp the importance of what exactly had shifted their perspective. He called his stall “The Hut Which Conveys One to Sagehood (通聖亭),” which is where the name “Tea Sage Hut” comes from. Out of place and out of time, he was a revitalization of the ancient forest tea sages who haunted the mountains of a long-forgotten China, offering healing draughts and bits of insight to those who crossed their paths. This gorgeous sculpture was made by our very own Global Tea Hut brother Xander Rijkee, the Tea Wayfarer of March 2014.

ELEMENTS OF A TEA & MEDITATION RETREAT

Time & Space

You will need to set aside time for your retreat. This might sound obvious, but it is one of the most common excuses people have not to do one. Check your calendar, take time off work, utilize a long weekend, do whatever you need to create some time for this important period of self-cultivation. Make a note of it and let others around you know so as to solidify it and make it more real. You need to create a sense of commitment towards it so you will not just blow it off for that new blockbuster. Set a reasonable time frame and then commit to it.

You will need space for both for tea and meditation. They could be the same space, but for all practical purposes, it would be easier to have a different space designated for each activity. If you already have such spaces, great, and if not, then here is a great opportunity to create them. Consciously choose where you will drink tea and sit in meditation during your retreat. In addition, carefully consider the other spaces that will be used, like the dining area, sleeping quarters and bathrooms. They should be clean and stocked with all necessary supplies. Do whatever is required to prepare and organize your spaces for the retreat. You will be very happy you did, trust me! There is nothing worse than starting your retreat and then having to invest energy in things other than tea and meditation that could have been taken care of with a little careful forethought.

The spaces do not need to be special. Small and simple spaces and short periods of time should never prevent you from doing a retreat. Like brewing tea, you need to work with what you have. You do not need fancy tea or teaware or brewing methods—just a bowl, water, kettle and organic tea are all that is necessary to make tea. So too, make use of the time and space you have and with the right intention you can have a very successful retreat.

Meditation

Here, I mean either seated or walking meditation. The specific type of meditation is up to you. In many retreat settings, the entire day will revolve around meditation, literally. Aside from meals, rest periods and sleep, you sit all day! For this type of retreat, however, there will be more of a balance between tea and meditation. The meditation periods will be broken up throughout the day and you can expect to schedule in five to seven hours of meditation, or more, each day. I included one-hour and one-and-a-half-hour meditation periods in my retreat. Most of them were one-hour sits. I used a simple timing app on my phone that I could trust so that I was not constantly disrupting my meditation by looking at a clock to see how much time was left. (This is a small tip that can make a big difference!) But if having your phone near you is going to distract you, you can use a simple clock or watch.

Discourses

I've found it useful to listen to recorded discourses each evening after the final meditation. If you have a recording from a particular teacher you like, and if it can be divided up throughout the retreat from start to finish, then you might also benefit by including these evening discourses. It is by no means necessary, but discourses help encourage you to practice with continued enthusiasm. This would have to be discussed and agreed upon if there were more than one person.

Tea

Many of you will be able to incorporate two types of bowl tea (sidehandle and leaves in a bowl) and possibly gongfu tea, as well, into your retreat. As I mentioned above, just work with the teaware and brewing methods you have access to. Tea and meditation retreats should be accessible to everyone, regardless of your experience with tea or preferred brewing method. Tea sessions will fall between meals and meditation periods. It is important to remember to leave time for both setting and cleaning up afterwards. Because the retreat is done in silence, I never listen to music during any of the tea sessions.

I always started each day with leaves in a bowl. For this, I gave myself half an hour, which was more than enough time because I was drinking tea on an empty stomach quite early in the morning; a few leaves steeped in three bowls of water was all I needed to start the day. When I was drinking sidehandle bowl tea, whisked tea or gongfu tea, I found one and a half hours more than enough to comfortably set up, drink tea, and clean up afterwards.

Meals & Cleaning

Two vegetarian or vegan meals a day should be sufficient, possibly supplemented with a light late afternoon snack of fruits and/or nuts. If there is someone willing to assist the retreat by volunteering to prepare the meals and manage the cleaning, then your retreat will be deeper. If there is more than one person doing the retreat you could also take turns making meals each day. Again, meals and groceries should all be organized in advance so you can devote as much energy as possible to the retreat. Recipes and menus go a long way here. You should really have all your meals planned out in detail for each day. You will need to sit down, search some recipes, write down the ingredients and buy them. Of course, you can cycle through certain meals, but do not eat the same thing day after day. Choosing recipes that can be made in advance is also helpful. Soup stocks and homemade meals that can be frozen or refrigerated can be useful for longer retreats. As much as possible, use ingredients that are fresh, local and seasonal.

Cleaning is a process, not a finished state. If you have to do the cleaning yourself, make a practice out of it. In fact, it would probably be better for most people to do the cleaning

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and “sweep” their ideas away than to separate cleaning from the retreat itself. While it is a tea and meditation retreat, the opportunities for growth come in doing *any* activity with presence. It does not matter what you do, but how you do it.

Work Periods & Free Time

At large, well-staffed retreats, *everything* is taken care of for you. Basically, you are temporarily ordained, and just eat, sleep and meditate. And that is always the ideal if you can manage it. However, at home, guiding your own retreat, often you still have chores that simply cannot be put off just because you need some time for self-cultivation. The plants need watering, the pets need feeding, and someone has to answer the door and communicate with the postman when he arrives. Not to worry—*this is your practice*. But you will need to schedule in time for such activities and manage work periods or free time very responsibly, alone or in groups. I tried one short work period in the morning and a larger work period in the afternoon. This was sufficient to complete my chores while still maintaining a retreat mindset. These types of retreats are not easy, and often taking more rest is the best use of free time. Living in the world is generally an experience of stimulation overdose. I would recommend limiting your free time to sleeping, walking or

more meditation, and cutting yourself off from books, computers, phones, notepads and anything that distracts you.

Due to my position here at the Center, I had to be on the computer and at the post office every day during my retreat. However, I found that it was not a problem, and, in fact, useful to do some work every day. It was essential, and therefore part of my practice. What I mean by this is that I was able to observe how I took what I cultivated at the tea table or in the meditation hall into my everyday life. And that is always the question, is it not? How do I take that which I cultivate or experience in practice and apply it to my everyday life in a useful way? After all, what *good* is any practice or insight if it does not apply directly to your everyday experience of life, to driving the car, brushing your teeth or walking up the stairs? Remember, to retreat is to move backwards. Though it is time for self-cultivation and introspection, a retreat is a movement back or inside, and the only way forward is to apply what you cultivate back into the world you temporarily left.

Observing myself out in the real world during my retreat was an excellent measure of how the tea and meditation were affecting my behavior. I found that I was able to carry more peace and presence into my activities, and more importantly, that when I did not carry such qualities, I was at least more aware of *that*. I was able to observe my negative habit patterns, take a step back and let them run their course.

Rules of Conduct for a Retreat

Here is a simple template for the codes of conduct that I found useful to give to other people when we did a retreat together. It can obviously be expanded on and modified to suit your particular retreat.

茶 Noble silence means silence of body, speech, and mind. Please observe noble silence from the beginning of the retreat until after the morning meditation on the last day. You may begin to communicate during breakfast on the last day.

茶 You may speak to management (resident students) if there are any problems during the retreat. But even these contacts should be kept to a minimum.

茶 Please use your free time wisely. There are no strict rules enforced, however, it would be a skillful use of time to take rest, meditate more, stretch, go for a walk, etc. Should you decide to study, write, or read, please keep it related to tea and meditation. It is strongly recommended not to use computers or smart phones or do anything overstimulating. This is a retreat.

茶 Do not let any use of free time become a distraction to others. Please be mindful.

茶 Please accept the food provided at each meal. The course volunteers endeavor to prepare a balanced, wholesome menu suitable for meditation. It is purchased with donated money and cooked by volunteers. Therefore, please do not get up and add condiments or other food to any of the meals. Practice gratitude for what is placed before you.

茶 Please do not lean against the wall during any meditation or discourse in the meditation hall.

茶 Be mindful not to point your feet towards the altar or teacher when stretching or relaxing your legs.

茶 Feel free to use more or fewer cushions for any sit, so long as there are enough for everyone.

茶 Adhere to the schedule with discipline. Try your best to view the schedule as support, rather than a hindrance.

And that is exactly what any spiritual path is about! It is not just about increasing the peace, happiness and joy in your life, but also learning how to skillfully navigate the vicissitudes of life that inevitably come your way. You probably do not need me to remind you, but life has got some serious curve balls coming your way. And let's face it, that means sickness, pain, failure, death and loss of everything. That is why I love tea and meditation: they awaken us to presence, which is always accessible here and now, and in a state of presence we can act skillfully, mindfully and respectfully, even in the face of the challenges life throws our way. The world can often be a chaotic place and it requires a great deal of presence to respond calmly, especially in chaotic situations. Tea and meditation are excellent teachers of presence and therefore wonderful allies to have when navigating our lives.

The Unexpected

Expect the unexpected. There is no telling what is going to happen during your retreat. Be flexible and understanding if things do not go according to plan. Your plans are ultimately meaningless in the eyes of reality. You might be wondering why, then, I have stressed planning out your entire retreat! Though your plans may mean nothing, *planning* is everything! Remember that.

Let friends and family know about your retreat so they do not bother you unless in an emergency. Set your email to auto-reply, letting others know when you will be able to respond next. If you are doing a longer retreat with others, you will need to consider things like laundry and other chores that were possibly overlooked. Also, it is a good idea to brainstorm a list of supplies you do not usually use, like meditation cushions, extra water and certain tea or teaware, just to make sure you do not forget those essentials before beginning.

Ending the Retreat

It is important to end your retreat well because re-entering the world can come as quite a shock when you have just spent so much time in stillness and silence. Planning to end your retreat becomes more important the longer your retreat is. But it is also quite easy. Essentially, you need to avoid jumping right back into your regular routine, or running around sharing all your insights with anyone willing to listen. You should relax back into the world in a calm fashion. While it might be slightly over-stimulating at first because your sensitiv-

ity was heightened as a result of the retreat, a little equanimity should have also been cultivated as well, helping you stay balanced, grounded and composed.

I usually end a retreat by ending noble silence on the morning *after* the last day. I like to sit in meditation for one last morning session, and then break noble silence during breakfast. But breaking silence depends on how you define your retreat. For example, I think of a three-day retreat as three full days of meditation plus one day to end. So if you are doing a three-day retreat, you actually need four days to finish properly. You should really use one day as a buffer before re-entering your regular life. If you have a short time frame due to work or school, you might be tempted to use your very last day to squeeze in more tea and meditation, but this is not a good idea! How you finish anything is how you start the next thing. I also would not immediately jump back on my phone or computer, or do anything over-stimulating. I might go for a walk outside, enjoy some conversations with other retreatants, perhaps read a simple book, weed in the garden or cook a nice meal. There are lots of simple things you can do that will help with your transition, and you might even find that the simplest things are a little more special after cultivating even the slightest amount of presence in your life as a result of the retreat.

It is funny and frustrating because a state of presence is always accessible to us, and yet we fail to maintain contact with it so much of the time, or at least I do! That is why doing these retreats routinely can be so helpful in maintaining a practice. You might only have time once a year to do a long retreat, but if you use this template, you might be surprised at just how easy and influential it is to do a few smaller retreats throughout the year on long weekends or short holidays. I wish you all the best in organizing your own tea and meditation retreat! Let us know if you have any other questions about organizing a self-course!





Schedule for a Retreat

Here is what a typical day looked like for the retreat I did. It can be modified to suit your needs, but it is a good structure to start with. I found the brewing methods worked great in this order, but you can organize it in any way you like. If you do not need such a long afternoon work period as I have scheduled here, simply shorten it and add another meditation period. As for the last day, I would end the retreat after the first morning meditation and during breakfast.

4:00am: wake up

4:30am–5:00am: bowl tea
(leaves in a bowl)

5:00am–6:30am: meditation
(listening to recorded chanting is also nice during this time)

6:30am–7:00am: breakfast

7:00am–8:00am: free time/work

8:00am–9:00am: meditation

9:00am–10:30am: whisked tea

10:30am–11:30am: meditation

11:30am–1:00pm: lunch/free time

1:00pm–2:30pm: bowl tea
(sidehandle)

2:30pm–3:30pm: meditation

3:30pm–6:00pm: work period

6:00pm–7:30pm: gongfu tea

7:30pm–8:30pm: meditation

8:30pm–9:00pm: evening discourse

9:30pm: lights out

