

~ What to Expect at a Path of Liberation Retreat ~

By Cortland Dahl

Hi, I am Cortland Dahl, and I am an instructor in the Tergar Community, and I am going to talk a little bit about what you might expect at a Path of Liberation Retreat if you have never been to one.

In the Tergar Community we have yearly retreats, lasting a few days to a week or sometimes longer, that provide an entry point to the Path of Liberation, which is the Path of formal Buddhist practice laid out by Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche that forms the heart of Buddhist Practice in the Tergar Community. Many of you might be coming from other communities or other traditions, while others might have already been practicing in the Tergar Community but working with the Joy of Living teachings. The way that Mingyur Rinpoche practices and teaches meditation, as those of you who have been studying and practicing the Joy of Living teachings know, really focuses on the exploration of awareness and especially in recognizing the essential purity and basic goodness of awareness itself.

Starting in the first level of the Joy of Living, where we get in touch with awareness through the practice of resting in open awareness, and then connecting with loving kindness and compassion, and insight and wisdom as the natural radiance or expression of awareness, all of those teachings really just come down to this very simple point of recognizing the fullness and richness of our being in the present moment and using meditation and practice as a way to connect with that and to bring that into our daily lives.

Once we move into the Path of Liberation and, as I mentioned, the retreats that we do as a kind of entry point into that style of practice, we are continuing that same journey. The essence, the core of the Path of Liberation, is still the exploration of awareness. A big part of what we do at Path of Liberation retreats revolves around receiving very experiential and direct guidance on how to first get a direct glimpse of

the nature of mind, and then how to familiarize ourselves with that and stabilize that glimpse, that recognition, so it becomes an ongoing, living experience that we can bring into our relationships, our work and professional lives, and even into the mundane activities that we do all the time on a day-to-day basis.

A lot of what you can expect at a Path of Liberation retreat, and probably most of the time that we will spend in the retreat, is receiving instructions and teachings on how to get in touch with the nature of mind, and then having a lot of time on the cushion to do formal practice where we take those teachings and work with them as a group in formal meditation. It depends on the retreat, but typically we might have, on longer retreats, either one or two teaching sessions each day, usually about an hour and a half in length. Then the rest of the time, usually four or five sessions over an hour and a half in length, we would spend in meditation. Each of those meditation sessions, usually, again, they would be about an hour and a half long, would be broken into three parts. We would meditate for 25 minutes as a group, and then get up for a short break to stretch our bodies, and then sit down for another 25 minutes, followed by another short break, and then a final half an hour period of meditation.

So there is always time when we can get up and move around a little bit and then sit back down being refreshed and revitalized, but there is usually a lot of time for practice, in addition to the teachings we receive from the guiding teacher of the retreat. For longer retreats, we might just have one teaching session a day, or if it is only a weekend or three day retreat, there might be more teaching sessions and fewer practice sessions, but there is always some balance between practice and receiving formal teachings. So most of the time we spend on the retreat is with that, and again revolving very specifically around exploring the nature of mind.

A second part of the retreats, and this is the part that is going to be a little bit different than what you might be used to if you have been going to Joy of Living teachings or retreats, is that there will also be an

element of using ritual, imagery, and the imagination as a way to connect more fully with our true nature, with the nature of mind.

One of the most important principles of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition is the idea of taking fruition as the path. The idea there is that we are not looking at the awakened state or enlightenment or liberation as a goal to achieve, but rather as something we can connect with very directly in the present moment. The way that we do that in formal practice, is rather than viewing what happens in our minds, what happens in our bodies, what happens in the movement of our hearts and emotions as an obstacle to our practice, we actually use those natural movements of our lives as a way to connect more fully and more deeply with our own awakened nature. A big part of that practice is using the imagination. So, in the same way as on a normal daily basis, we are thinking, we are remembering, we are projecting into the future and imagining what we will do and what we will say, in Vajrayana practice or in the practice of Tibetan Buddhism, we actually use that capacity that we all have to think, to imagine, as a way to re-orient ourselves to see the natural purity and radiance of the nature of mind. So part of what we do in a Path of Liberation retreat is begin to use the imagination and specifically through certain rituals that we might do, such as the ritual called “empowerment” or *abhisheka*, which is a Sanskrit term, to use all of that natural energy of the mind and channel that towards the path of awakening. That is something that might be a new experience for you if you are coming from the Joy of Living, but something that once we get familiar with it can be an incredibly powerful tool and catalyst for the process of recognizing the nature of mind.

So there will be some ritual, and that typically happens on the last day of retreat and is an important part of what we call, “transmission.” When we want to take this into our lives and do these practices as part of our daily routine, then in the Vajrayana tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, it is said that we need to receive certain transmissions. The empowerment that I just mentioned is one of those. Another that we receive on the Path of Liberation retreats is called, “the reading

transmission,” where we simply have the text that we will use as the basis for our practice, read aloud to us.

Another element that you will find on Path of Liberation retreats is the opportunity to take refuge. The act of taking refuge is considered the starting point for formal Buddhist practice and it marks the moment at which one is said to actually become a Buddhist. Since the Path of Liberation retreats are really the gateway and starting point for those who want to begin a formal Buddhist practice within the Tergar Community, offering the opportunity to take refuge is something that we typically have at every Path of Liberation retreat. Often this happens towards the end of the retreat, and sometimes it is paired with other teachings, but in essence, what the act of taking refuge and the formal ceremony of taking refuge involves is a commitment to awakening to one’s own true nature.

As I mentioned, the essence of the Buddhist path as taught by Mingyur Rinpoche, revolves around exploring one’s own awareness and the very nature of awareness. In taking refuge, what one is ultimately looking toward for that source of inspiration, guidance, for that source of feeling whole and complete, is actually one’s own true nature. So one is taking refuge in one’s own true nature on an inner level, and on an outer level one is taking refuge in the Buddha as one’s outer source of guidance and support, in the dharma as one’s path or the teachings that we follow in practicing the path of awakening, and in the sangha as one’s community of support that helps nurture and support one as one treads the path of awakening.

There is a formal ceremony that we offer in the Tergar community and that we typically have at these Path of Liberation retreats, where you formally affirm your commitment to Buddhist practice, and you will typically receive a refuge name, which is kind of your Buddhist name in practice, and there is again a small ceremony that takes probably about 15 or 20 minutes. Everybody who goes to a Path of Liberation retreat will have the opportunity to do that. It is not to say that you have to do that, some people might go to a few retreats before they decide formally to take that step, but that will always be given as an opportunity. For those who want to begin practicing the Path of

Liberation, that is a prerequisite to begin doing those practices. So along with the pointing out instructions on the nature of mind and the transmissions for doing the *Ngondro* practices, taking refuge is actually one of the necessary steps that you would take before you begin doing the formal path of practice in the Tergar Community, which Mingyur Rinpoche has laid out as the Path of Liberation.

You also have an opportunity to receive more direct personal guidance in your practice. This comes in a few forms on the Path of Liberation retreats. Especially in longer retreats that are a week, or two weeks or even longer, we typically have opportunities to both receive and participate in group interviews with the guiding teachers of the retreats, which might be Mingyur Rinpoche, Khenpo Kunga, or other teachers who are guiding the retreats, as well as opportunities to have one on one personal interviews with Tergar Instructors. This is an optional part of the practice, not something you necessarily have to do, but it is a great opportunity if you have specific questions about the next steps in your practice, or challenges that are coming up that you would like to share and receive some more practical guidance on. We do our best to make plenty of opportunities to receive that kind of personal instruction that many people benefit from.

So these are things that happen on Path of Liberation retreats, and they are important components because they give us the permission to do certain practices in our daily lives once we leave the retreat.

The other thing that might be a little bit different from what you are used to in a Joy of Living context, is that most of our practice sessions begin with opening prayers. We might do a prayer of refuge, affirming our connection and commitment to the path of awakening, to connecting with our own awakened nature, or the prayer of *bodhichitta* which is affirming our commitment to work not only for our own benefit but to help all beings discover their awakened nature, or other prayers connecting with the wisdom of lineage that is coming down to us through Mingyur Rinpoche and our other teachers. These just take up a few minutes at the beginning and end of our teaching

and practice sessions, but they also, like the other practices we do, can be very powerful tools to help us get in touch with that true nature.

The form of these retreats might look a little bit different than a Joy of Living format, but in essence it is really quite similar. They are all just guiding us back to awareness, to glimpse, and directly experience for ourselves that basic goodness, purity, and wholeness that we feel when we get in touch with our own true nature.

That is just a little overview of what you can expect on a Path of Liberation retreat in terms of the format.

Another point to mention, which is quite similar to what we see in the Joy of Living tradition or approach, is that we have periods in practice where we might be in silence as a group. If it is a week-long retreat, we might spend three or four days in silence, and there might be other periods where we will not be in silence, where we can connect with others on the retreat, and either reconnect with friends that we might have seen at previous retreats or new friends that we might make at the retreat. These periods of non-silence are really important, not only because they help foster the connections and the community that provide a great way to stay grounded in our practice after we leave the retreat, but they are also wonderful opportunities to integrate this connection with the nature of mind, this connection with awareness, with compassion, with insight, to actually bring that into relationship with others because, of course, that is what our daily life is like. So we work with both the periods of silence where we are more focused on exploring our own experience, and also periods where we are very much in relationship to others as a way to integrate those periods of connecting with our own awareness with other aspects of our lives and experience.

So that is a general overview of what you can expect on a Path of Liberation retreat, and if you are wondering if this style of practices is right for you, please do not hesitate to get in touch with myself or with any of the other Tergar Instructors or staff. We will be happy to help you figure out if this is the right step for you to take and to answer any questions you might have about these retreats.

So we hope to see you at a Path of Liberation retreat, and best of luck in your practice!