

## **There's No Place Like Home: Creating Your Own Self-Guided Meditation Retreat**

Meditation retreat experience can play a very important role in the transformation of our hearts, minds, and bodies, which is at the core of the Dharma. The deep settling that happens when we practice with diligence over a sustained period of time supports the release of stress from our nervous systems, calms our anxieties, and allows us to regain the clarity that underlies wise and compassionate action. For such retreat practice, most of us are used to going away from home to a secluded place for some amount of time, where we can be protected from daily-life distractions and responsibilities. Because of this, it may seem that the pandemic has made retreat practice impossible, at least for a while, but VIMS teacher Karen Summer has presented us with a wonderful option, a structured in-home retreat!

Karen has a significant amount of personal experience with in-home retreats undertaken over many years. Some have been as short as a half-day, others as long as a month. This August she gathered and presented to us her ideas on how to create an in-home meditation retreat. Happily, Karen has agreed to share her carefully formulated guidelines, along with a listing of related resources, in the Reflections in this month's newsletter (in the future, you will also be able to find these in a newly designed and more easily accessible Resources page on the VIMS website). Karen begins with these words on the subject from Gil Fronsdal's Insight Meditation Center's Guidelines for Home Retreats:

*One dictionary definition for retreat is "a period of seclusion for the purposes of prayer and meditation." With this meaning, the word is closely related to the concept of sanctuary, a place where the sacred is found. Home retreats can teach us how to see our home as a sanctuary in ordinary life. Meditation retreats are not a withdrawal from the "real world," they are a withdrawal from the distractions, preoccupations, and fantasies that keep us from the "real world." Being on retreat is stepping back from distraction and delusion so we can be with what is most true—the world we experience when seen clearly, calmly, without the overlays of our mental projections. It is a time both to discover the sanctuary of a liberated heart and to carry this sanctuary into all areas of our life. In this sense, meditation retreats become an entry into the world, not a retreating from the world.*

### Creating Your In-Home Meditation Retreat

#### 1. Why an in-home meditation retreat?

- **Safety** during Covid
- **Use your creativity and be your own teacher**
- **Familiarity** - The mind can settle down much more quickly because your surroundings are wholly familiar. During the retreat, it's easier to maintain a quieter mind because you aren't encountering new people and novel diversions.

- **Efficient use of time** – no packing, travel, becoming acclimated to a new place with lots of strangers.
- **Cost savings**

2. Why choose to go to a retreat center for a formal retreat?

- **If you live with other people**, uninterrupted periods of meditative seclusion may be difficult or impossible.
- Discipline and **guidelines imposed by teachers** and the center support continuity of mindfulness. They create a “container” for your retreat.
- You may be a **newcomer to meditation** and would benefit from frequent check-ins with teachers or their assistants. You can draw inspiration from following what other retreatants are doing.
- **Less pre-planning**

3. There is a **middle ground** – an abode that isn’t your home that you can inhabit without distraction.

4. **Clarify your hopes and goals**

- Why do you want to be on retreat?
- Are there meditative themes you want to focus on?
- What type of retreat do you want (structured, freeform, something in between)? What rules and schedule(s) are you imagining?
- Helpful to talk about your plans with a teacher

**5. Planning is important – all steps to be done before the start of your retreat**

These are general guidelines that can apply to all at-home retreats.

The mind can be slippery, lazy, bored, agitated if there’s nothing “to do.” You can talk yourself out of (or into) all types of unwholesome behavior.

This is a gift to yourself, a very special time to experience the sustained effects of a quieter mind. You’ll want to purposefully decrease stimulation.

Keeping in mind the preciousness of this time will contribute to your self-discipline and self-confidence.

- Plan to **turn away from your phone** (except for timers, accessing dharma talks, perhaps check-ins with retreat buddy) and unplug from all news media.
- **Tie up all communication “loose ends”** with family and friends, work, and volunteer duties. This will take much longer than you anticipate!  
 If you are essential to work or your family and cannot wholly “unplug,” you’ll have a different experience. Don’t let this stop you from creating special time and conditions to quiet your mind.
- **Be your own teacher** It’s essential that you decide in advance what instructions/dharma talks you’ll listen to, for how long, and when during the day you’ll do this. If you need to access the internet, set it up so you won’t be tempted to take a peek at email or news feeds. (see Tara’s suggestions pages 5 and 6)
- Assess your weaknesses in advance. Are you likely to become seduced (in a compulsive way) by an activity? If so, set some goals and "fencing" around the possibility.
- This is a great opportunity to get out of narrative, story-telling habits and into our senses. In the classical IMS Vipassana retreats, teachers discourage reading. Will you allow yourself to read? If the answer is yes, you may want to set a daily time limit. What about writing? (see Tara’s suggestions p. 7)
- How will family get in touch with you in case of emergency?
- Purchase all food, meds, and dietary supplements or arrange with someone to drop off supplies at pre-set days and times.
- Determine the day and time you’ll start and end your retreat and stick to these.

- Two detailed schedules for at-home retreats are in this document. Do you want to follow one of them or will you be more free-form? (Tara's suggestions pages 4 and 5. See link to an excellent ½ day retreat.)
- Preparing your space, a personal anecdote: for my first 2 retreats, I covered my bookcases and other piles of “stuff” with sheets because I didn't want my mind to be distracted. (IMS is very sparsely ornamented). I closed off one room. I was glad that I made these alterations. However, after the 2<sup>nd</sup> retreat, I knew they were unnecessary. The retreat time was so precious that I wasn't tempted to pick up a book or otherwise divert myself by physical things nearby.
- At IMS, retreatants are assigned to group interviews with a teacher 2 or 3 times over a 10-day retreat. You may want to schedule some check-in time with a teacher or retreat buddy either during the retreat or just afterwards. (see Tara's suggestions p. 7)
- Imagine you are sitting and walking meditatively with others. Observe Noble Silence and move mindfully and more slowly than usual. Mindful movement may be challenging because you'll be in familiar surroundings (with habits of tasks done in haste) and you don't have others around you who are moving slowly, thus serving as inspiration and reminders. Arrive on time for each sit.
- This is Gil Fronsdal's guidance for his July, '20 at-home retreat: “Please be mindful of your physical movements during sittings the same way you would in the meditation hall, not moving around, not drinking or eating, and not ‘leaving the hall’ unless necessary.”
- “Protect your practice” is a saying one hears about the immediate post-retreat time. Transition slowly to your pre-retreat pace, if you can. Enjoy your quieter and refreshed mind as long as possible. If you're at a retreat center, the drive home can be a natural transition. You'll have to be more intentional if you've completed a home retreat.

In compiling these suggestions, I am relying on my experience having completed 11 in-home retreats, ranging in length from 2 to 21 days. Karen Summer

### **Tara Brach's website:**

[https://www.tarabrach.com/create-home-retreat/?mc\\_cid=269d48ad6d&mc\\_eid=8a0d873e4f](https://www.tarabrach.com/create-home-retreat/?mc_cid=269d48ad6d&mc_eid=8a0d873e4f)

### **Create a Home Retreat**

With the spreading coronavirus, there is the need for many to stay at home. This is the perfect time to create a home retreat for yourself.

The purpose of a retreat is to follow a formal rhythm of practice that allows you to center yourself, tend your body, quiet your mind, see the present circumstances with clarity and freedom, and open your heart. It will take some dedication to do this, and we will show you how to set it up. By choosing to let go of the usual habits of distraction, online time, unnecessary busyness and tasks that can wait, you can make this a beneficial and healing time.

Though initially a home retreat may feel unfamiliar or hard, you will gradually find yourself settling in and feeling grateful for the rewards. Now is the perfect time to draw on the inner strength of meditation and deepen your capacity to live amidst it all with awareness and compassion.

As a support for your practice, we are including a video of a guided half day retreat—here's the link: [\*\*\*Free Half-Day Home Mindfulness Retreat with Jack Kornfield and Tara Brach.\*\*\*](#)

We've also included a list of online resources that you might find helpful in planning your retreat. [\*\*\*Check it out right here.\*\*\*](#)

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***Here are the elements that will help make a home retreat work for you:***

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### **Decide on Your Schedule**

Considering your level of meditation experience and your other obligations, create a daily schedule for yourself. Be realistic. If you are new to retreat, start modestly.

For beginners, schedule several 20-30 min sitting periods in the morning, and several periods in the afternoon and evening. Have each sitting period alternate with a 20-30 minute period of walking meditation, yoga, Tai Chi or quiet mindful walks outdoors, if available. [\*\*If you are new to walking meditation, here are some instructions.\*\*](#) If you are more experienced, make your sittings 45-60 minutes, with a period of mindful movement between each sitting.

Your retreat might be for one day, or for as many as fit your current life. Should you choose a multi-day retreat, once you have created a schedule, stick to it for two days and learn how it works for you. Then you can extend it for more days. Even at home, the mind takes time to quiet down. This is especially true in a time of difficulty in our lives or in the society around us. Be patient. [\*\*Here is a full day sample schedule\*\*](#) that can be modified to best fit your needs.

### **Create a Container of Stillness**

Being on retreat requires spending most of the day in silence, minimizing communication with others and refraining from news and entertainment. Try to structure your retreat days with simplicity—put an away message on your email, save your snail mail for later, prepare the simplest meals you can...some in advance if you're able to.

### **Set Your Intention**

When you begin the retreat, take a few minutes to consider what is calling you to this time of deepening practice. It may be to do this retreat for the benefit of yourself and those around you. It may be to undertake this retreat to deepen your presence, steadiness and compassion in difficult times. It may be to release your fears and become more loving, to contribute more to our world....

If you wish, you can light a candle or place a flower or inspiring image near you. Quiet yourself and inwardly create a strong and clear intention. Once you set your intention, you can recite it in your mind or write it down on a notecard and place it by the candle or image.

Regularly during the days of your retreat, remember and reaffirm this intention.

### **Listen to Teachings**

Once or twice a day listen to a talk that supports your retreat practice.

Experienced practitioners might visit [dharmafeed.org](http://dharmafeed.org) or Insight Timer, where you will find talks and teachings on many topics, from a variety of teachers. Often, teachers will include audio and video talks on their websites. There are many to choose from at [www.jackkornfield.com](http://www.jackkornfield.com) and [www.tarabrach.com](http://www.tarabrach.com).

On any of these platforms, you might choose talks given at retreats that will guide you over the course of a week or 10 days. We've included a [sample list](#) on the resource page.

New meditators might use our **Mindfulness Daily** program and do several lessons a day. [You can download this free course here](#). These talks are short, and can be followed by a longer period of silent sitting practice.

### **Enjoy Guided Meditations**

Listening to and following along with guided meditations can be tremendously helpful, particularly when you are doing a retreat at home without the support of others around you.

As with the talks and teachings already mentioned, guided meditations can be freely downloaded via teacher websites ([www.tarabrach.com](http://www.tarabrach.com), [www.jackkornfield.com](http://www.jackkornfield.com), [www.trudygoodman.com](http://www.trudygoodman.com)) or other platforms like [Dharma Seed](#) or [Insight Timer](#). Use them liberally.

Listen to practices of mindful breath, mindful loving awareness, compassion and loving kindness, big sky of mind, healing, self-compassion and others. You can repeat them many times, and let the audio guidance help deepen your meditations. Reading along with transcripts can also be helpful. [Here is a list of guided meditations and heart practices to get you started](#).

### **Choose Your Practices**

In this time of collective difficulty it is good to include both awareness meditations and heart-centered practices as part of your retreat.

Practicing with mindful and loving awareness, you can learn to be a field of peace, a compassionate witnessing of all that arises in body and mind. For many, this means beginning with a simple breath practice to calm and steady the mind, and then opening the field of mindfulness for all else that arises.

Adding practices of Lovingkindness and Compassion for yourself and all those around you can deepen your ability to hold the current situation with a big heart, tenderness and respect for all. Practicing an open sky meditation, which invites a sense of vastness and timelessness, can give you a spacious perspective to hold it all.

Choose a one or two simple practices from the above referenced websites and stick with them for the first days. [Here are some suggestions](#).

### **Welcome Whatever Arises**

Anytime you meditate, especially for longer periods, difficult energies will naturally arise. Worry, restlessness, sleepiness, frustration, irritation, doubt are

among the most common. Repeating thought patterns and unfinished business of the heart will also arise. These offer some of the very best opportunities for your meditation to deepen, and your wisdom and love to grow.

Receiving these with mindful loving awareness and adding compassion for self and others, you can begin to trust your skill of mindfulness and your good heart to hold it all. [Here are a few dharma talks that offer guidance in navigating the waves.](#)

### **Read Mindfully**

It can be enormously helpful to read teachings and about meditation. Re-reading favorite classics like *A Path With Heart*, *Zen Mind Beginners Mind*, *Radical Acceptance* and *Being Peace* can provide the perfect complement to your meditation. Choose a few of your favorite books and read them periodically through the days of your retreat for support and inspiration.

### **Connect with Spiritual Friends**

It is really helpful to have the support of others when you undertake a retreat. In person, sitting and walking together makes a very strong field of shared focus and intention that carries everyone together. For a home retreat, it is also very helpful to have the support of others who are practicing at the same time.

If you can, find a retreat buddy or several friends and agree to do the retreat days together. Let each other know the schedule you will be following and set a time twice a day to check in with one another by zoom or FaceTime to mindfully share your experience of the day—the difficulties and the successes. You might also use this time to meditate together. You will be surprised at how inspiring and helpful this can be.

### **Join a Larger Community**

Joining together in Sangha is an essential part of practice. Many meditation centers feature online classes, spiritual friends groups and other offerings. Here are a few that might interest

you: [www.imcw.org](http://www.imcw.org), [www.spiritrock.org](http://www.spiritrock.org), [www.insightla.org](http://www.insightla.org), [www.dharma.org](http://www.dharma.org)

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### **Online Resources for Your Home Retreat**

For those newer to meditation, here is a [structured 1/2 day mindfulness retreat with Tara and Jack](#). This retreat includes a shared schedule of sitting, walking, and teaching and is part of our popular [Power of Awareness](#) training.

### **Sample schedule for residential mindfulness retreats:**

6:30 – 7:00	Mindful Movement
7:00 – 9:00	Breakfast
9:00 – 9:30	Sitting
9:30 – 10:00	Walking or other movement
10:00 – 10:30	Sitting
10:30 – 11:00	Walking or other movement
11:00 – 11:30	Sitting
11:30 – 2:00	Lunch, rest, read, movement
2:00 – 2:30	Sitting
2:30 – 3:30	Walking or Mindful Movement
3:30 – 4:00	Heart Meditation
4:00 – 4:30	Walking
4:30 – 5:00	Sitting
5:00 – 7:00	Supper & Walking
7:00 – 7:30	Sitting
7:30 – 8:00	Walking
8:00 – 8:45	Listening to dharma talk
8:45 – 9:30	Stretch or walk, then sitting

### **Walking Meditation – Instructions**

**[Walking Meditation and Instructions – Tara Brach](#)** (with written instructions)

### **Sample list of daily retreat talks:**

#### **Day 1**

[The Blessings of Embodied Presence – Tara Brach](#)

[The Seat of Awakening – Jack Kornfield](#)

[Peace of Mind – Trudy Goodman](#)

#### **Day 2**

[The Power of Awake Awareness – Tara Brach](#)

[The 3 Gateways to Freedom – Jack Kornfield](#)

[Awareness – Trudy Goodman](#)

#### **Day 3**

[Trusting the Gold – Tara Brach](#)

[The Garden of the Heart – Jack Kornfield](#)

[The Wood Wide Web of Being](#)

## **Day 4**

[Love and Death – Tara Brach](#)

[Vastness and Love – Jack Kornfield](#)

[Devotion – Trudy Goodman](#)

## **Day 5**

[Realizing Our Undefended and Awakened Heart – Tara Brach](#)

[The 10 Perfections – Jack Kornfield](#)

[Calm – Trudy Goodman](#)

## **Day 6**

[Widening the Circles of Compassion – Tara Brach](#)

[The Bodhisattva – Jack Kornfield](#)

[Sila as a Way to Love – Trudy Goodman](#)

## **Guided Meditations**

- [Coming Home with the Breath \(20:34 min\) – Tara Brach](#)
- [Breath Meditation \(15:00 min\) – Trudy Goodman](#)
- [Arriving in Embodied Presence \(24:00 min\) – Tara Brach](#)
- [Mindfulness of the Breath and Body \(30:00 min\) – Trudy Goodman](#)
- [Basic Body Scan \(20 min\) – Tara Brach](#)
- [Big Sky Meditation \(38:39 min\) – Jack Kornfield](#)
- [Open Awareness – Relaxing Back into Presence \(30:00 min\) – Tara Brach](#)

## **Guided Heart Meditations**

- [A Steady Heart \(13:45 min\) – Jack Kornfield](#)
- [Metta – with instructions \(39:55 min\) – Tara Brach](#)
- [Guided Meditation: Metta \(30:53 min\) – Tara Brach](#)
- [Lovingkindness Meditation \(30:09 min\) – Trudy Goodman](#)
- [Lovingkindness Meditation – Metta \(35:59 min\) – Trudy Goodman](#)
- [Loving Awareness toward the Body \(13:51 min\) – Trudy Goodman](#)
- [Forgiveness Meditation \(11:30 min\) – Trudy Goodman](#)
- [The Practice of Compassion \(11:04 min\) – Jack Kornfield](#)
- [Tonglen/Radical Compassion \(32:43 min\) – Tara Brach \(with Transcript\)](#)
- [Compassion in the Time of Coronavirus \(12:00 min\) – Jack Kornfield](#)

## **Working with Difficulty – Talks and Meditations**

- [Radical Acceptance Revisited – Tara Brach \(with Transcript\)](#)
- [Spiritual Reparenting – Tara Brach \(with Transcript\)](#)
- [Darkness of the Womb: 4-Key Steps in Transforming Suffering – Tara Brach \(with Transcript\)](#)
- [Fear as a Pathway to Loving Presence: Night Travelers – Tara Brach \(with Transcript\)](#)
- [Healing Trauma: The Light Shines Through the Broken Places – Tara Brach \(with Transcript\)](#)

- [Disarming Our Hearts: Letting Go of Blame – Tara Brach](#)
- [The Dance with Pain – Tara Brach](#)
- [Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Working with Attachments and Addictions – Tara Brach](#)
- [Reflection: Transforming Fear \(11:19 min\) – Tara Brach](#)
- [Bringing RAIN to Difficulty – Tara Brach](#) (with Transcript)

**Sally and Guy Armstrong's Schedule** for in-home retreat sponsored by IMS, September 1-8, 2020      bold = teacher-led sessions

[Note from Karen: This is very close to a traditional IMS in-person retreat. Usually the 9 am sit would contain the meditation instructions for the day. Since this is a Zoom retreat, I am guessing that the instructions will be given at 11 am to accommodate attendees on the West Coast.]

6:00 – 6:45 Sit #1

6:45 – 9:00 Breakfast, chores

9:00 – 9:45 Sit #2

9:45 – 11:00 Walk or Sit

11:00 – 11:45 Sit #3 **with instructions**

11:45 – 12:45 Lunch

12:45 – 2:00 Rest, walk

2:00 – 2:45 **Q&A**

2:45 – 5:00 Walk or sit (#4)

5:00 – 7:30 Dinner, chores

7:30 – 8:15 **Dharma Talk**

8:15 – 9:00 Walk or stretch

9:00 – 9:30 Sit (#5)