

Solitary Spiritual Retreat by Bob Ferguson

The practice of the solitary spiritual retreat, or isolation, is a method of self-discovery that has been practiced in one form or another for centuries, from the monks in their quiet cells to the Tibetans in their secluded caves. In today's society with its hurried pace and inescapable technology, this practice of spending time in silence and peace is even more important for those seeking contact with the inner self. If, as Jesus once said, the Kingdom of Heaven is within, we would be well served to begin earnestly looking in that direction. While books, teachers and the Internet can show us where others have gone before, and give us invaluable contacts, only we ourselves can make the inward journey.

There are several pointers to help one in making time spent alone productive, and more than just a relaxing break from the pressures of daily life. The most important is to have a reason for your quest, to have a pressing question. Before I had come in contact with the technique of isolation, I intuitively knew that the best way to answer important questions was to go off alone, and find the answer myself, in myself. Later, after meeting others who had seen the value in this, the process was confirmed. This need not be only the big questions, such as "Who am I?" and "What is life all about?" but could also be about life's problems: "Why do I have difficulty with the people at work?" or "How did my marriage become so messed up?" or "Who are these people called my parents/kids?" The answers are found within, and can best be heard in quiet and silence.

I've heard it said that spending time alone is a cop-out, that it's simply a personality defense being taken as a spiritual endeavor, and this certainly can be the case, if it weren't for the question. Without a pressing question, and the focus required in bringing it to the forefront, time alone could be just a vacation from social pressure. I've seen this first hand, for my biggest problem in isolation was that I liked it, a lot. I would become very comfortable, and had to fight to keep the focus on the task at hand, and not drift into the pleasure of a tension-free environment. One way to keep this focus is to bring a few good books, ones that will keep our head in the right place. We can read a bit once in awhile to bring our head back to the problem and remind us of why we're there.

Another problem I've observed is that of fear. Some are afraid to leave society and its distractions, and thus cannot spend the time alone necessary for the mind to relax and focus on inner questions. They might have problems they're avoiding, or place more value on other's thinking than their own, and thus can't stay in the quiet long enough to produce results. One thing for certain, if you have one of the above predilections, you will come face-to-face with it in isolation or retreat, and hopefully thus become more aware.

The spiritual experiences that people have are a result of looking inside themselves.
- Richard Rose

Facing the unknown takes a lot of personal quiet and divorcement from the world around you. I studied this very carefully. It is the bridge between the inner and outer man. It takes hundreds of hours of facing the unknown to get the unknown to yield one little insight, one little piece at a time.

- Jim Burns

We must also be comfortable. We need to spend our time in contemplation, not lost in the distraction of basic survival and fighting the elements. Moderation here is the key. While we do not want the distractions of cell phones and television, we also don't need to spend our time and energy trying to stay warm and dry, or fend off the local wildlife and the curious. Too much frugality and we lose our time and energy, and so the same with too much distraction.

Fasting and celibacy are useful tools we can incorporate into our retreat, too. Fasting is a great way to shock the system and return to a quieter frame of mind, with less ritual, while abstinence saves our energy and helps turn our head away from the habitual draw of nature. If fasting has not been practiced before, it may be best to take it easy until you see how your system will react, and gain a bit of experience with it first. While fasting may be incorporated into the retreat to jumpstart the process and help restore our inner vitality, we shouldn't make asceticism itself the point. We're not going to get any deep thinking done, or clear our receptive mechanism in order to strengthen the intuition, if we are spending our time passed out under the desk. Moderation once more is key, especially until we become accustomed to fasting's effects.

*If the brain and belly are burning clean
with fasting, every moment a new song comes out of the fire.
The fog clears, and new energy makes you
run up the steps in front of you.
When you're full of food and drink, an ugly metal
statue sits where your spirit should. When you fast,
good habits gather like friends who want to help.*

- from "Fasting," by Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks

Most of the people I know that have practiced isolations have started out slowly, with perhaps three days and nights at first, then have gone on to retreats of three weeks or so two or more times a year. Whether it's for three days or a month, don't let temptation lead you into stopping early. Even if you're having trouble remembering why you planned the retreat in the first place, or feel it's no longer productive, sticking it out may have unseen benefits, even months later. Of course, there's no use staying if you're too ill or in real danger. The most difficult thing for me was to stay focused on the search and not be distracted by the beauty of the place and the slow passing of time. Staying focused was paramount.

Once you make the commitment to spend a block of time alone, don't forget to watch, to look at the various internal mechanisms before and during that will try to get you to postpone, leave early, or pass away the time in fantasy. If nothing else, you will have made the effort, and become more aware of yourself, and that's a good thing.

Richard Rose gave me the best description of the attitude one should take. He said not to approach isolation as challenging God or the universe for an answer. Don't draw a circle in the sand and say you won't come out until you are enlightened. Instead, and this is my interpretation, work as hard as you can and be thankful for whatever happens.

- Shawn Nevins