

Buddhist Meditation and Trauma: 10 Steps for Trauma Survivors on Meditation Retreats

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For over 2,500 years, the Buddha's promise of liberation from suffering has attracted those who seek healing. As interest grows in mindfulness practice as a path to healing trauma, this article addresses the intensive silent meditation retreat environment, and the specific challenges for people who have experienced trauma.

Buddhist meditation offers validation of the truth of suffering and pain. Oftentimes people with trauma breathe a sigh of relief in feeling that for the first time they are among others who understand the concept of suffering and speak the language of working with painful feelings. Another healing factor is the safety of a retreat. Retreats provide a very safe and structured environment where everything is taken care of, including food and lodging. Add to this the simplicity of the silence, a predictable schedule, and participants who are committed to non-harming, and you have an environment that supports us in relaxing our habitual vigilance. One retreatant mentioned that the retreat environment "was the first time I ever truly felt safe." Deeper than even safety though, is the ability of the retreat environment to transform the heart and mind. Spiritual insights can deepen our sense of who we truly are, and shift the whole course of our lives.

Yet, the promises of healing and transformation that a retreat holds need to come to fruition in a particular way to benefit people with trauma. Without proper preparation and awareness of their specific needs, a retreat could actually be detrimental to a trauma survivor. Retreats longer than two days can break down the defense system. It is the nature of mindfulness to intensify whatever is in the mind, like a magnifying glass. It's not possible to choose what is intensified (i.e. to see only love and lightness versus pain and fear). For instance, what might be mild sadness coming into the retreat can turn into depression after several days of meditation. The silence of the retreat might initially feel safe, but as emotions and feelings surface, it can trigger experiences of not being listened to, or being "silenced." Another factor is that some people who have experienced trauma may tend to push themselves to extremes. Learning to "power through" by enduring pain and ignoring their bodily and emotional signals of distress was often a primary survival strategy. A good way to support a person considering a retreat is to help them examine their expectations. If the motive for retreat is, "if meditation is supposed to help suffering, then the more the better," then it is wiser to think in terms of steadiness and integration rather intensity or quantity of days.

The following Ten Steps are to help people with traumatic experiences more effectively utilize the meditation retreat environment.

Step One: Prepare the ground

Before deciding to go on retreat it's important to feel relatively stable emotionally. It is not the best time to go on retreat if you are barely able to stay afloat in daily life, if you have had a major recent stressor, if you are in an active flooding phase with flashbacks, if you are having suicidal or hopeless thoughts (even if only periodic), or if you have had a recent change of medication.

It's also important to build up a tolerance for meditation practice. Meditation retreats are like running a marathon – a demanding experience, requiring steadiness and endurance. By building up gradually you get to know the landscape of your mind and understand how you react in an intensive environment. If you have a regular home sitting practice, build up to several one-day retreats, and then to a weekend retreat. It's strongly recommended to talk to a meditation teacher who knows you to help you decide on the right timing for you.

When you are ready to try a longer retreat, it's very important to set up a "safety net" of supports for yourself. Let the retreat teachers know that you have experienced trauma and where you are in your process with healing, so they have a context to understand what is happening for you. If you are in therapy, make sure the retreat center has emergency phone numbers of friends, family and therapist that can be called if needed. Most of all, it is not the time to go off any medication. While the term "retreat" may suggest ease, it is actually a demanding inward foray. As with any major undertaking, you will want to have maximum supports in place. Since medications may be helping you with anxiety or mood disorders, or allow you to get a good night's sleep, retreat is a crucial time to keep all your current supports as steady as possible, regardless of decisions you may want to make about medication in the future.

It's good to also bring psychological and practical supports with you. These might include photos of loved ones or pets. You can even set up a mini altar with sacred objects and photos to remind yourself that you are not alone, and that you have support. On the practical front, a favorite blanket, pillow or stuffed animal can be comforting. Make sure to bring enough warm clothing, as the body getting cold and shivering can imitate the tensing and contraction of trauma and can be retriggering. One retreatant brought crayons and art supplies, which proved invaluable in providing a break from the intensity of emotions that arose.

Step Two: Learn to take the backwards step

An important skill for people with trauma to master – on retreat and in daily life – is what in Zen is known as "taking the backwards step." Backing off is often more productive than powering through, and going slowly *is* the faster path. People with trauma on meditation retreat can become so zealous about being mindful that they develop a sort of hyper-mindfulness, which leads to efforting and eventually to overwhelm. Becoming overwhelmed is not good practice or good healing. One student noted, "I realize now that I was repeating the overwhelm of the original trauma by trying to heal all at once. My nervous system needs to move more slowly, and I am learning to respect this." The transformative power of a meditation retreat is to steadily open in a gentle way, as roses bloom, one petal at a time. If you proceed patiently and let things take their natural course, the healing process will unfold gently in its own perfect time.

Sometimes it's wise to "tailor-make" a retreat if formal sitting practice gets too intense. Most teachers are more than happy to help modify a schedule for you if needed. A teacher might even ask you to back off completely from the sitting practice for a period of time, or do more walking meditation, light reading, or simple work practice. This is

not “a failure.” Instead it is skillful means to help you integrate the insights of the retreat at a pace that works best for you.

If you need more support, contact the teacher or a staff support person (sometimes retreat centers have a person on-call for just such situations). It’s good to pay attention to where the emotional “water line” is for you. Sometimes you can be going through difficult experiences for many days and it feels like “treading water at neck level.” It’s not easy, but you are staying afloat and managing. Then, however, something shifts and the water level gets higher, and now it’s above your mouth and you can feel you are “drowning.” This is when to ask for help from a teacher or designated staff person. Don’t try and tough it out. Those of us who lead retreats want you to have all the resources you need, so if the water line is too high for too long, please let someone know.

Step Three: Take in the safety of the present moment

A useful practice for people with trauma is to consciously take in the fact that the present is safe, comfortable and without threat. Since trauma survivors have faced danger and endured pain, their nervous systems are perpetually on the alert, bracing for peril. The quiet, sheltering and benign environment of retreat offers a unique experience of present-time safety that survivors can benefit from actively and intentionally focusing on. The aim is to “steep” your nervous system in real-time safety and comfort and begin to relax habitual hypervigilance.

This can be done with eyes open, and by fully engaging all of the senses – sight, sound, smell, taste and feel. It could help to gaze gently around you, feel some soft fabric between your fingers, or drink a cup of tea. Engaging your senses helps to “sound the all clear” and register that “now” is safe on a cellular level. You can add internal self-talk to remind yourself of your present age and location, and that you survived the traumatic event(s) and are safe. It’s a good skill to practice when you are sitting or resting quietly, not during formal sitting or walking periods. You can open your eyes and do this as a “fallback” skill anytime overwhelm threatens. Though this skill might seem almost too basic, it can be extremely effective. Once, when a retreatant was doing this on and off throughout the day, it dawned on her that her arm actually moved in response to an impulse from her shoulder, and she realized: “Hey, it’s connected to me, it’s mine!” It was the first time she felt safe enough to realize she was in her body. This is the same principle of pairing a traumatic or phobic feeling with a relaxed state that is found in classic systematic desensitization approaches to healing trauma. The relaxing environment of retreat, with no threats or demands, allows the parasympathetic nervous system to engage. With the parasympathetic system engaged, difficult feelings and experiences can be re-associated with safety, reducing their traumatic charge.

Step Four: Stay grounded in the body

A common meditation instruction is to choose a physical “anchor” in the body – a neutral “home base” that we can return our attention to after getting lost in thoughts or feelings. For some survivors, using a physical anchor can be grounding and help prevent dissociation or emotional overwhelm. For others, it can feel triggering to focus on certain areas or aspects of the body. This can be particularly true for people who have experienced sexual abuse or other body-based trauma.

There is a variety of anchors to try; the aim is to find one that feels relatively neutral. In many traditions paying attention to the breath is recommended – feeling the air moving or coolness at the nostrils, or the movement of the breath in the belly. However, focusing on the breath can feel very unsafe or anxiety provoking for you if you have experienced trauma that restricted your breathing (i.e. oral sexual assault). In that case, you could experiment with the feeling of the hands touching each other, or resting on the legs or in the lap. Some people use the sensation of the contact of their buttocks with the cushion or bench as an anchor, or the sensation of the whole body sitting. The soles of their feet can feel quite neutral. If body-based choices feel uncomfortable for you, you might want to try using sound as your anchor – just paying “bare attention” to the sounds arising and passing away in the room. Be sure to speak up and ask a teacher for help finding an anchor that feels comfortable to you.

Some people who have experienced trauma have learned to leave their bodies altogether as a way to endure overwhelming experiences. On one three month retreat, when given instructions to “stay in the present moment” one man couldn’t figure out why no matter how hard he tried, he wasn’t able to stay present in his body for more than even a few seconds without spacing out. Finally he realized, “Stay in my body?! Are you kidding? It’s never been safe to be in my body! Why should I believe it’s okay to do it now?” In recognizing this, he then began to gently work with his teacher on feeling safe one moment at a time, which allowed him to be more present.

Retreat can be a good place to begin to listen and feel “from the neck down.” It may be helpful to start by being aware of neutral or pleasant bodily feelings. For some people, feelings of comfort or wellbeing may be so unfamiliar that they are not even noticed. Gravity is a neutral feeling, and can be an easy doorway into being present. Before you go to sleep at night, take a few minutes just to feel the heaviness of gravity, which is always “here and now.” Also, when you take a warm shower, let yourself absorb the pleasantness of the warmth. Small increments like this, many times daily, will develop “embodied” awareness. However, if you begin to feel triggered or uncomfortable, you can take the backwards step to a more neutral focus, such as taking in the safety of the present moment.

Step Five – Engage the energy of compassion or lovingkindness

Many people on retreat have said that lovingkindness (or “metta” in Pali) was a “lifesaver” to them. Unfortunately, people with trauma can suffer from particularly intense feelings of unworthiness, convinced that something is wrong with them, and that they are “bad” or inherently flawed. Although self-blame might initially have been a helpful coping strategy, later this “badness” becomes part of our self-concept. Imagine a glass of milk smashed on the floor. The glass and the milk are mixed together, but their basic natures are unchanged: the glass is sharp and jagged, and the milk is fresh and fluid. With trauma, we can mistake the sharp fragments of the traumatic experience for ourselves, and become confused about our true nature.

Lovingkindness is one of the best practices to counter the shame and self-hatred of trauma. Some people feel more comfortable with “unconditional friendship” towards the self, as “self-love” can feel too daunting. If your retreat doesn’t involve an element of

formal lovingkindness practice, it's a good opportunity to learn the habit of talking to yourself in the same way you would a dear friend. Even though your first response in a situation might be an automatic "I'm such an idiot," or "Why did I do that, *again!*" you can start to notice this, and make your second response, "Well, that wasn't perfect, but it's okay," or even "I'm doing my best."

You might want to take some time each day to breathe from the heart area while bringing to mind an image of yourself as a young child. If that is too difficult, then use the image of a pet, baby animals, or a peaceful place in nature as you breathe through the heart center. If you cannot connect to lovingkindness, you can try compassion practice instead. Compassion involves simply feeling the pain of what you are going through without trying to change it in any way. Compassion is sometimes described as "the quivering of the heart in response to suffering." If you notice you are feeling a painful emotion, compassion is gently saying, "Aw, this is hard" and then softening around the difficulty. The mindful noticing of your pain, along with a sense of caring towards it, can deeply transform your heart. Go gently; if connecting with the pain becomes too much, take the backwards step to a more neutral focus.

Step Six: Learn to "surf" strong emotions

Feeling strong emotions without getting lost in them is a vital skill for people with trauma on retreat, and in daily life too. This means learning how to "surf" the waves of emotion without getting "dunked" – finding a way to be with feelings without getting overwhelmed. A skill that will help with this is what is called "maintaining dual awareness." This means developing the capacity to divide your attention and have it run on "parallel tracks." A way to do this is to actively engage the witnessing part of your mind, which can hold in awareness the knowledge that a strong emotion is happening. This gives you some distance from the emotion so you can be with it, but not "in" it. Rather than drowning in a roaring torrent of feeling, engaging the witness puts you up on a bridge above it, able to observe it without getting swept downstream.

It's important to be able to engage the witnessing mind, because it's the nature of mindfulness to strengthen that which you are paying attention to. All kinds of emotions – including fear, anger, and grief – will arise over the course of a retreat. Some people have many emotions cycle through a day, while others will have to work with one particular emotion for days or even weeks. For instance, sadness might arise for a few hours or a day, and even though it's a strong emotion, you can stay with it in a mindful way (like noting "sadness is here"). But if the sadness increases, and feelings of fatigue, hopelessness or even despair come up, it's time to "blow the whistle" and take self-caring action to prevent overwhelm.

One of the principles for healing trauma is to touch an experience and then back off. On retreat, if you are working with a difficult emotion such as grief, you can touch the edge of it, feel the sensations and the storyline, and then back off. You don't want to dive deep, just touch the edge of it for a minute or two. Then back off to a neutral body anchor (See Step Four) such as your hands touching or the bottoms of your feet, and stay there for about five minutes. Then, when you are ready return to the difficult emotion, touch

the edge of it for a minute again, then back off again back to the neutral place. This trains the mind to experience difficult feelings in homeopathic doses.

Some strong emotions are actually “feeling memories,” which explains why they are so intense. It can be very helpful, when you are gripped by a supercharged emotion, to ask yourself “Am I in memory right now?” That helps the witness part of your mind discern if this is an “old” traumatic feeling or if it is really an appropriate response to your here-and-now reality. Maintaining dual awareness in this way helps you “surf” flashbacks without getting “dunked.” The witness part of your mind can stand strong in the knowledge that the event is not happening now, that you already survived it, and are currently safe.

A crucial emotion to surf as a person who has experienced trauma is self-judgment. In the silence of the retreat it’s easy to assume others are doing just fine and not having any problems and you are the *only* one experiencing strong emotions or struggling with the retreat schedule. Remember, “don’t compare your insides to others outsides” (it’s an unfair comparison) and there is no “right” way to practice any type of meditation. It’s common for someone with trauma to begin a retreat wanting to diligently be a “good” student. When we hit the hard places in our experience, we get the old familiar feeling of, “something is wrong with me,” followed by the need to “cover things up and pretend to be like everyone else.” This was the split set up by the original trauma where we felt hurt and violated and yet we had to pretend things were okay so life could go on as usual. If you are mindful of this perfection/pretend/despair cycle as a trauma pattern it can help you on retreat.

Step Seven: Understand and manage flashbacks

Even if you are not in an active “flooding” phase of frequent flashbacks, new memories and flashbacks (memory fragments) can surface in the stillness of a meditation retreat. Flashbacks can be accompanied by extremely intense emotions or “feeling memories” (i.e. paralyzing fear, “criminal” guilt, or powerful self-hatred), and may take the form of visual images, physical sensations, or involuntary body movements that recall the physical motions associated with the trauma. Flashbacks are memory fragments of past events that are returning to our consciousness, so that we can integrate information about the traumatic memory, and ultimately heal.

An analogy to help understand the traumatic process is that the mind deals with overwhelming events by smashing them to pieces and jamming them into a freezer. When the event starts to “thaw,” fragments of memories begin returning to consciousness. However, these memories come “wrapped” in the unfeared emotions that were “flash-frozen” at the time of the event, so they feel extremely “fresh.” Often, people will feel intensely ashamed about *having* flashbacks. This shame actually has its roots in the “badness” and intense dysregulation of the original traumatic event, and is not about who you truly are.

Trying to either “meditate through,” or “block” flashbacks by concentrating on an anchor can be highly anxiety provoking. Remember that mindfulness intensifies whatever you focus on. Give yourself permission to open your eyes or quietly get up and take a break.

If you've had flashbacks before, you and your therapist may have worked out a way to process them, so that you are prepared if memory material surfaces. If you are experienced with processing flashbacks, be sure that you "finish" them. It can be helpful to journal or draw, or do authentic movement – whatever works for you to take in the information provided by the flashback and finish processing the memory. Make sure you are grounded and fully "back" to the present before returning to meditation.

If you are new to having flashbacks (or if you are having a new memory), it is very appropriate to interrupt them. Open your eyes, scan around you, and reach out for support. Flashbacks can be hugely intense and frightening – you should not have to go through them alone. Talk to your teacher or a designated safety person at the retreat center, or call your therapist or someone in your "safety net."

Here are some skills that can help bring you back to now: State out loud the current date, your name, age and location, and that you survived the experience and are currently alive and safe. Rub your hands together, stamp your feet and pat your legs to help "wake yourself up to the present." Look around the room and find six objects of six different colors, or try naming as many of the fifty states as you can. Temperature changes can help. Applying ice to the back of your neck can interrupt flashbacks very quickly. Make use of "channel changers" – interrupt your aloneness and go sit or walk where there are people around, take a brisk stroll outside, or engage your senses by eating something or drinking a cup of tea. For a longer term reminder, one person printed out signs that read "SAFE" and posted them at eye level around her room. The aim is to get out of the past and land feet first in the present – and know you are safe.

Step Eight: Know the difference between annihilation and "no-self"

On longer retreats, retreatants can begin to touch up against experiences of "no-self," "emptiness," or "the void." This is a natural spiritual progression of the falling away of the illusion of a solid and separate self. It is natural for anyone experiencing this falling away to feel some trepidation arise, but for someone who has experienced trauma it can produce abject terror. "No-self" moments can trigger old traumatic feelings of impending death, abandonment or annihilation. One retreatant felt panic every time that he began to experience the lack of "self." Looking more closely, he saw that early experiences of severe neglect and abandonment had made him feel "erased" and annihilated, and these feelings were piggybacking on his current spiritual experience. "No self" is difficult to understand intellectually because it is a spiritual experience. It's best to talk to your teacher if you have questions about this. A teacher can help you distinguish between an old fear experience and what might be a natural unfolding of insight.

Step Nine: Reorient to your true nature

Trauma deeply confuses us about our true nature. By softening our habitual patterns of contraction and self-hatred, the retreat environment can help us see through the untruths of our mind and its conditioning. Despite the many challenges we may encounter in our healing process, at the heart of our being is a steady, "non-anxious presence" that doesn't need to be maintained; it only needs to be recognized and remembered. This aspect of retreat, while perhaps the most essential learning, is also the most difficult to put into

words. One way to glimpse this is to ask yourself, “Who am I?” in a repeated question, without looking for a particular answer, gently going deeper each time. Hawaiian elders believe that we are born with a “bowl of light in our heart.” Trauma and other negative experiences put stones into the bowl, dimming it or sometimes even completely covering it over. Retreat offers an opportunity to take out the stones and let the light of our true nature shine again.

Step Ten: Navigate re-entry to daily life

Re-entering daily life after a silent meditation retreat can be a complex transition. Your nervous system has adjusted to a life of unusually tranquil predictability, in terms of human interactions and daily routine. It can be very jarring to move suddenly into the busy-ness, rushing and worry of modern life. The rule of thumb is that it takes the same amount of time as you were away on retreat to reintegrate back into daily life. So if you were on retreat for a week, it might be a week before you feel “normal.” You may feel lightheaded, spacey and emotional for a time. Make sure you do things to stay grounded such as simple household tasks, being out in nature, remembering the feeling of gravity, or doing some yoga or Qi Gong.

Within a few hours (or minutes even) of ending a retreat you might feel like you've lost all concentration or insights from the retreat. Don't judge yourself. Most of all, realize that it takes time to integrate the experiences of retreat and some of the most important insights can actually happen *after* the retreat. Remember, your life is now your “retreat” and the opportunity to be mindful is always available.

Re-entry is a good time to practice taking the backwards step. If you can, plan to take a day or two off after the retreat ends before resuming your normal routine. It might be helpful during this time to avoid exposure to media and postpone interactions with difficult people. It can happen that people will try to comfort themselves by repeating a certain activity. For instance, one retreatant watched fourteen hours of movies in succession post-retreat. If this happens, you can gently ask yourself what need you are meeting in this way, and try to address the need more directly. Also, it's best not to make any major changes in your life based on retreat revelations for at least the first month following the retreat. It is well known (this applies to everyone, not just to those who have experienced trauma) that what seems like a very compelling idea post-retreat can look quite different a few weeks later.

It's normal for people to feel very dedicated to continuing practice after retreat and to make commitments around daily sitting. If you can't keep your vows regarding sitting, don't beat up on yourself. Just do what you can. Create a realistic “bottom-line” practice for yourself. This might be five minutes of being with your breath in the morning before you get out of bed, or of sitting once a week with a local group.

Whether you are practicing on retreat or in daily life, let yourself relax in your process of healing. Sometimes people feel that trauma is “getting in the way” of their mindfulness practice or preventing their spiritual progress, as there are times when formal sitting meditation isn't recommended. Remember that mindfulness is a path of clear seeing, and clear seeing takes courage. If painful emotions or memories are buried in your body/heart/mind, the act of bringing compassionate, sustained awareness to your inner

experience may bring these to the surface to be known and felt, and eventually released. This process is *part* of your path of clear seeing, not an obstacle to it. Deeply understanding this will give you the patient gentleness needed for your lifelong journey to freedom.