
Weekend Meditation Retreat: **Your Guide**

by Susan Piver



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Intention

When you set out
on the path,
the path begins to **materialize**,
but not before.

The best time is now.

When you set out on the path, the path begins to materialize, but not before.

Take a moment, right now, to set your intention for your retreat. Is it to find respite from stress? Deepen your meditation practice? Discover the meaning of your life? Just to get away from it all?

All of these are great.

Take a moment. Place your hand over your heart. Ask yourself: *What is my heart's desire?*

Feel that desire reverberate within your chest. Imagine it radiating outward and filling all of space.

You're ready to start.

Overview

It is time to remember the **you** who
lives
and breathes
underneath all of your
responsibilities, concerns, hopes,
and fears.

This program invites you to go into your room or home, shut the door literally and metaphorically, unplug all connections and let go of everyday concerns. It is meant to be a real retreat from the rhythms of conventional life.

During this weekend retreat, I ask you to separate yourself from your daily life and immerse yourself in reflective practices. It begins on a Friday at dinner time and ends on Sunday after lunch.

It is time to remember the you who lives and breathes underneath all of your responsibilities, concerns, hopes, and fears.

The program I lay out in this eBook is based on retreats I have lead around the world. It is meant to help you go within, rest your mind, and make space for your innate wisdom to arise.

All you have to do is select a weekend and put it on your calendar. You can start today or in 6 months, it doesn't matter. What matters is committing to it. This marks the beginning of the retreat.

Preparation

- **Reserve a weekend** (or other 2.5 day period) on your calendar.
 - Set up a meditation area in your home or room. If you already have one, that's great. If not, **choose a spot with room for a meditation cushion or a chair**.
 - If you feel so moved, **create an altar**. There is more detail on this in the section called, "Make Offerings."
 - If you don't have a **journal**, buy, find, or make one. It can be a beautiful notebook or just some note paper in a binder. You will be doing a journaling exercise or two during the retreat, so choose paper and a pen you enjoy writing with. Best not to use a computer.
 - Find something to use as a **meditation timer**. A simple kitchen egg timer will do, or a timer app for your handheld device. But since you will not be going online during the retreat, if you use an app, be sure to avoid the temptation to check email or revise your Netflix queue.
- Please **plan in advance** so that you can let those closest to you know you'll be engaged in this program for a weekend. Ask for their understanding and support. Tell them you may not be able to respond to phone calls, texts or e-mails immediately. As much as possible, prepare things in advance and lean on family, friends, or roommates to handle your usual daily chores.
 - Get all your **grocery shopping** done for the weekend before it begins.
 - Choose and **purchase a book** you'd like to read during the retreat. It is best to choose something that supports you on your inner journey. Use your judgment and select something that will challenge you to delve within rather than escape.

Tools

Meditation
Journaling
Rest
The Schedule

These are the four tools you'll be employing during your retreat.

Each one is explained on the following pages.

1. Meditation

The meditation practice we will be doing is called *Shamatha*. Shamatha is a Sanskrit word that means the “Practice of Tranquility.” So this is an excellent place to begin.

If you have a regular meditation practice, you will simply be doing that technique, but for longer sessions than you may be used to.

If you are new to meditation or if you simply need a refresher, please review the basic instruction [here](#).



2. Journaling

During your retreat, I ask you to do a very simply journaling exercise following your morning meditation on Saturday and Sunday. It is called “free writing” or “morning pages,” as coined by the wonderful writer, Julia Cameron.

Free writing is simply this: you pick up pen and paper (don't use a computer) and just start writing down whatever comes to mind until you fill three pages. It can be anything. Whatever words are in your head, transcribe them onto the page.

They do not have to make any sense.

They do not have to be punctuated correctly.

Don't worry about spelling.

You never have read or share these pages.

Usually, free writing pages look something like this:

I don't know why I'm doing this, this makes no sense. My neck hurts. I wonder if that will interfere with my meditation practice. God, I am so worried that so-and-so will email me during this retreat and they'll be pissed if I don't get back right away. I ate too much oatmeal for breakfast. I am so sad that dad is so sick. I wish I could do anything to relieve his suffering. If only I was a nurse. I should have gone to nursing school!!

Etc, etc.

The basic rule of thumb is simply to keep your hand moving across the page. You don't have to be a speed demon, but do keep moving. Remember: your thoughts don't have to make sense or be in any discernible sequence. You can even throw these pages away after you're done, if you like.

Depending on how quickly you write, this exercise will take from 25 to 45 minutes.

Rest

It can seem odd to consider rest as a tool, but it is likely to be the most powerful one of the weekend.

We are all so busy.

We are all so preoccupied.

We are all so accustomed to 24/7 entertainment.

Leaving it all behind for an entire weekend can be thrilling, daunting, nerve-wracking, and/or a delight. During your retreat, it is likely to be all of the above.

This weekend, there will be long periods of time designated for “rest.” This can mean any number of things. When it is time to rest, please choose from the following activities only.

- Napping
- Daydreaming
- Reading (something related to your inner pursuits preferably...)
- Taking a walk
- Staring into space

- Drawing, painting, photography, writing poetry...any of the arts--but purely for purposes of creative joy. No work!! No trying to prove anything!

Some things notably missing from this list are:

- Watching TV
- Going online
- Talking on the phone
- Household chores
- Errands

Please try to reserve this weekend for the pleasures of rest and solitude.

Rest is different than spacing out. True rest imparts the qualities of absorption and delight. Spacing out tends to make us both dull and speedy.

The Schedule

“The first rule of **magic** is
containment.”

–Julia Cameron

The aforementioned Julia Cameron once said, “The first rule of magic is containment,” and I have never heard truer words.

Often we think that the way to begin a new program—whether it’s a dietary change, a workout routine, or a spiritual practice—is to talk to some friends, read a few books, maybe take a class, and then give it a shot. But there is an additional element that is important to your success: the form you create to stabilize your efforts. Without the proper environment, the excitement and energy of a new endeavor can dissipate rather quickly.

The schedule outlined herein creates the environment. It is the container for this program. It will create the form and structure that will allow the energy to build. Without this containment, there is no energy or magic. So following the program as carefully as you can is important.

The Question of Food

I'd like to take a moment and visit this important topic.

I suggest a dietary component for the retreat, although not a complicated one: you don't have to give up meat, coffee, or sugar, or eat only organic vegetables, but please simplify the foods you eat during the retreat and, if you can, for a few days in advance of the retreat start date, so you don't have to spend a lot of time during the retreat figuring out a new food preparation routine.

For the duration of the retreat, the only rule I suggest is to eat high quality foods. This means nothing packaged, processed, or genetically engineered. If you drink coffee, buy organic beans. If you want to eat candy bars, get some good-quality organic chocolate. If you must eat a ham sandwich for lunch every day, make it nitrate-free and on whole grain bread. Instead of sugared cereals for breakfast, try a granola that isn't too sweet. You'll be able to find what you need at a health food store, or do the best you can at your regular grocery store. For beverages, stick with water, milk (whole, soy, almond, etc), coffee, tea, and fruit or vegetable juices. Avoid soda unless you'll spend the whole weekend with a headache if you don't get your diet cola. If you hate to cook and eat only takeout, buy your to-go food from a health-conscious establishment.

This is not a diet by any means, and you don't have to get overly strict with yourself, but try to cut as many chemicals as you can from what you are eating. Doing so will leave your mind clearer.

Also during this time, please avoid alcohol or recreational drugs, because these substances can make meditation very confusing. If you have an alcohol or drug problem or are undergoing medical or psychiatric treatment, please don't start this program. Consult your doctor and wait for a time when you are able to devote your attention to it fully.

If you are taking prescription medications, of course you should continue to take them, according to your doctor's instructions.

If you have any concern whatsoever about this program, please check with a health professional before beginning it.

Creating Sacred Space

Make offerings.
Request blessings.
Dedicate the merit.

I want to outline the three steps you can take to make any endeavor a sacred act.

The first two steps, making offerings and requesting blessings, happen before you practice. The third step, dedicating the merit, comes in at the end.

Let's look at each of these three steps and then review how to employ them to create an environment of sacred introspection.

Make Offerings

When you walk into a shrine room of any religion, there are often flowers, candles, and incense. These are offerings. You can make a similar type of setup in your home, by creating a smaller version of a traditional shrine. Shrine objects tend to center around the senses: things you can see, smell, taste, touch, or hear. Images of respected figures, flowers or scented candles, sweets, beautiful fabrics, and music are often included in sacred spaces. A shrine or altar is a way of focusing the energy of these offerings, so a table covered in brocade holding a candle and a photograph is a very simple way of showcasing your offerings. It's not important to make your altar table the most beautiful in the history of the world. What is important is that it be clean and heartfelt. Or you can simply place some fresh flowers next to a picture of someone or something you love and aspire to emulate. You can light a candle as an offering of warmth, light, and safety. And, when in doubt, the best offering is one you can always make, no matter where you are or how you feel and that is your own experience in the moment.

So, before meditation, touch in with how it feels to be you right now. Maybe you feel great, crappy, or all of the above. Feel it. Offer it to whom or whatever you hold sacred by saying something like, "I offer exactly who I am right now to the highest wisdom and goodness I can imagine."

You don't have to know exactly what this means, just rouse a sense of generosity.

Request Blessings

Requesting blessings, as with secret offerings, requires you to give up knowing what a blessing looks like exactly. Requesting of the gods what you think will make you happy (bring me my dream job) is like making a reservation at a 5-star restaurant and then asking if you can go back into the kitchen and cook your own meal.

Instead of cooking your own food, just try to order what sounds good to you. *Please let me feel satisfied in my work* is better than *please make me VP of Finance*. Other options include *please let me find love*. *I wish to be free of this pain*. *Please teach me to forgive*. These are good, basic requests that will allow a master chef to serve you something that exceeds all expectations.

It's totally OK to ask the world to bless you. And who do you ask? If you are a Christian, you could ask Jesus. If you are Buddhist, you can ask for your teacher's blessing. You can seek the blessings of magic if you are an Alchemist, of Gandhi if you're a pacifist, of the earth if you're a Pagan. The idea is to seek the blessings of your lineage.

What lineage do you belong to? Is it a religious tradition? Maybe so, maybe not. Maybe you're of the lineage of poets or scientists, of painters, mothers, CEOs, crusaders, or lovers.

Get a sense of your heart's lineage and, in whatever way feels natural to you, request the blessings of that line...

Requesting blessings is predicated on the assumption that greater powers are at work. This could mean any number of things to each of us. That greater power could be God, a deity, an angel, or the quality of human goodness. It could also be something unnameable and perhaps this is the most trustworthy power of all. It doesn't really matter what you call this greater power. The only thing that seems required is to not quite understand what it is. Whenever anyone seems to know with too much certainty just what this power is, where it lives, what it thinks, and the primary means of access, I become a bit suspicious. Sure, all sorts of explanations make sense. But the only thing I know is that the moment I think I understand the sacred oneness of existence, I've stepped outside of that oneness and therefore can't be trusted.

So when you request blessings, no matter how certain you are of where and whom they come from, let there also be a little bit of not knowing.

Now you are ready to practice.

Dedicate the Merit

I offer my practice
so that it may
benefit
everyone.

Once you have finished your practice, connect with whatever benefit you may have created for yourself through undertaking this practice. Once you have this felt sense, give it away. In whatever way feels natural for you, make the aspiration that the results of your practice could be used to also benefit others. This is very important. My teacher, **Sakyong Mipham**, says that not dedicating the merit is like not hitting the “save” button on your word doc before shutting down.

If you belong to a tradition that employs a traditional dedication of merit (mine is on the last page of this book), you could use that. It’s also great to simply say to yourself, *I offer my practice so that it may benefit everyone.* Give it away.

The Schedule: Friday

Noticing the **space** you're in is a simple way to come into the present moment.

When you come home from work Friday night, make sure your meditation area is set up. Sometime in the evening, have a seat on your meditation cushion with your journal for a brief journaling exercise. Settle onto your cushion and take a moment to just sit there and appreciate wherever you are. What can you see, hear, smell, and so on?

Noticing the space you're in is a simple way to come into the present moment.

Open your journal and finish these sentences:

Please help me to _____ so that I may _____.

Please guide me to _____ so that I may _____.

Please show me _____ so that I may _____.

Please teach me _____ so that I may _____.

Let these sentiments be your offering for tonight.

Practice meditation for 10 minutes before bed.

Dedicate the merit.

The Schedule: Saturday

(Times are approximate. I've started your day at 7a, but if that makes you nuts, shift everything an hour back or forward to accommodate your body rhythms.)

7:00 - 7:30 Meditation

If you're accustomed to 10-minute sits, this could seem like a lot. That's okay. Go for it. Use your timer, commit, and see what happens. It may be way easier or harder than you thought, or it may be none of the above.

7:30 - 8:15 Free Writing

Get out your journal and simply let the words flow.

8:15 - 9:45 Breakfast prep, consumption, clean up

Prepare yourself a delicious breakfast, based on what "delicious" means to you. If you're an eggs and bacon gal, go for it. If you're a "just a cup of coffee" guy, go for it. Whatever you choose, consume make your food of the highest quality possible, to the best of your ability to find and afford it. Feed yourself well, not according to the latest health findings nor as an act of indulgence. Feeding yourself well means putting good quality ingredients down the hatch. Nothing processed. No chemicals

Make sure to clean up--not OCD-style, but thoroughly. There is something delightful about finishing the job wholeheartedly. And right now, you've got nothing but time...

9:45 - 11:30 Rest

As you may recall, your choices for rest include sleeping, day-dreaming, reading something uplifting, going for a walk, just staring into space, and so on. Nothing to accomplish. Nothing to prove.

11:30 - 12:00 Meditation

Let yourself enjoy another period of breath-awareness meditation. Notice how (or if) this session differed from the morning practice. If you feel like journaling about your experience, please do. If you feel like writing a poem, please do. If you do not, please don't.

12:00 - 2:00 Lunch prep, consumption, clean up

Make yourself an awesome lunch. Best to keep it kind of light, otherwise your afternoon practice could be on the sleepy side. As you are preparing your food, just prepare your food. Don't listen to music or flip through a magazine. Just prepare, eat, and clean up. Take your time.

2:00 - 5:00 Rest

At this point, you may be growing weary of rest. Seriously. Hang in there with it. Don't give in to the temptation to just quickly check email or catch 30 minutes of Real Housewives

of the OC. It would be great if you could fit taking a walk into this time period.

5:00 - 5:30 Meditation

5:30 - 7:00 Dinner prep, consumption, clean up

7:00 - 8:00 Journaling Exercise (optional)

Retreat is a great time to step back and take a larger-than-usual view of your life. The purpose of this exercise isn't to get you to see what needs changing or how you can improve things--it's simply meant to help you contemplate your situation within a peaceful environment.

1. What three things do I love about myself?
2. What three things scare me about myself?
3. How can I honor my body?
4. What can't I say?
5. What can't I feel?
6. Who do I need to forgive?
7. Who needs to forgive me?
8. What is unfolding in my life right now?
9. Who are my true friends?
10. What is my intuition about what is unfolding in my life?

Take your time answering these questions. Let each one act as a writing prompt and just start putting words on the page in response. See what happens. You can answer all of them or pick and choose the ones that appeal to you most.

8:00 - 8:30 Meditation

This is your final practice session of the day. Please give yourself props for spending two whole hours in meditation practice on this day. That is such an awesome achievement.

8:30 Dedicate the merit.

Hang out until bedtime. It's totally fine to go to bed as early as possible. Let yourself enjoy the luxury of sleep.

The Schedule: Sunday

The Sunday schedule is largely a reprise of Saturday morning. Your retreat will end at lunch.

You are obviously free to resume your regular activities when the retreat is over, but, if possible, try to keep the rest of the day simple.

7:00 - 7:30 Meditation

7:30 - 8:15 Free Writing

8:15 - 9:45 Breakfast prep, consumption, clean up

9:45 - 11:30 Rest

11:30 - 12:00 Meditation

12:00 - 2:00 Lunch prep, consumption, clean up

2:00 Dedicate the merit

How to Close Your Retreat

Stay, stay, **stay**
with it until the end.
But no further.

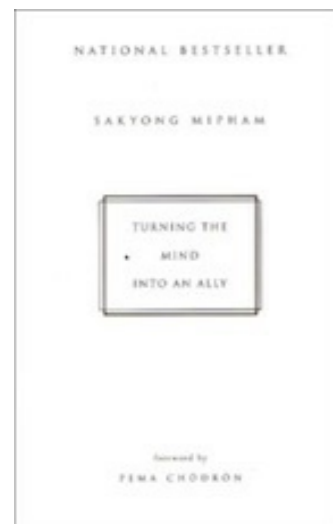
The best way to end a meditation retreat is to end it when it's over. Meaning, don't end it *before* it's over (*oh, well, there's only an hour left, I might as well stop now*) and don't prolong it beyond the end by trying to hang on to a peaceful vibe.

Just as you stay with the entire out-breath during meditation practice, not abandoning it to skip ahead to the next in-breath, don't abandon your retreat. Stay, stay, stay with it until the end. But no further.

Don't hang on to it or push it away. Simply watch it dissolve. This itself is excellent practice.

Books

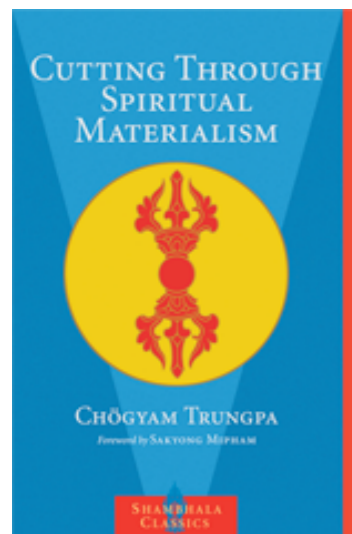
I highly recommend choosing a dharma book to accompany you during your retreat. Reading about meditation is especially helpful. Here are a few suggestions.



Turning the Mind Into an Ally

by Sakyong Mipham

I am not recommending this book because Sakyong Mipham is my teacher and I love him. I am recommending it because it is one of the best books ever written about Buddhist meditation. It is so direct. It is so warm. It is so clear. I have read it many times and it never ceases to shower me with insight.



Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism

by Chogyam Trungpa

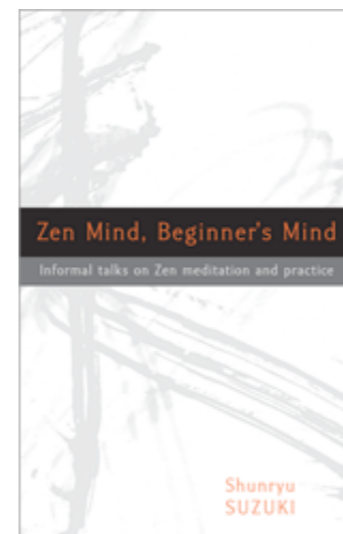
Early in my practice, I asked my instructor what I should read to gain additional insight into the practice. Without hesitation, this book--and Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind by Shunryu Suzuki (below). Now, as a meditation instructor myself, I make the same suggestions. This book is a primer for making your practice a route to liberation rather than additional confusion.



Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior

by Chogyam Trungpa

There is nothing I can say about this book that would praise it adequately. It may be the most important book of my life. It is a guide to living your life as a fearless, tender, brilliant, kind warrior.



Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind

by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi

This book also stands as one of the best books ever written about the practice of meditation. Although I don't practice zazen, I find that every word also applies to my own practice because Suzuki Roshi cuts through cultural forms to reveal the heart essence of meditation practice. How does one begin a meditation practice? What is the correct posture? What is the point of meditation altogether? This book answers these questions in a way that is both bracing and expansive. Thank you, Suzuki Roshi.

Dedication of Merit

By the confidence of the golden sun of the Great East,
May the lotus garden of the Rigden's wisdom bloom.
May the dark ignorance of sentient beings be dispelled.
May all beings enjoy profound, brilliant glory.



About Susan Piver



Susan Piver is a Buddhist teacher and the New York Times bestselling author of seven books, including **The Hard Questions** and the award-winning **How Not to Be Afraid of Your Own Life**. Her latest book is entitled **The Wisdom of a Broken Heart**.

Piver has been a student of Buddhism since 1995, graduated from a Buddhist seminary in 2004 and was authorized to teach meditation in the Shambhala Buddhist lineage in 2005.

She teaches workshops and speaks all over the world on meditation, spirituality, communication styles, relationships and creativity. She wrote the relationships column for body + soul magazine, is the meditation expert and contributor at drweil.com, and is a frequent guest on network television, including The Oprah Winfrey Show, Today, CNN, and The Tyra Banks Show. Her work has been featured in the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, TIME, Parade, Money, and others.

In 2011, Piver launched **The Open Heart Project**, an online meditation community which with nearly 10000 members who practice together and explore ways to bring spiritual values such as kindness, genuineness and fearlessness to everyday life.