

Coming Home to Stillness, on Silent Retreat

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I sit writing in a private little hermitage overlooking one of Vajrapani's luxuriant, tree-lined valleys. The forest is flush with shifting light and bird song. There is a palpable aliveness here, both in the pristine natural world, and in the kind hearts of the people who make it home.

I have enjoyed the immense privilege of spending more than a month on private retreat -- time that has enriched my life immeasurably and in ways yet unknown. I've been held in silence, as 'Lama's Ridge' is designated for meditation, introspection and solitude. It's a place to become present to yourself, to explore of the quiet depths of your being.

In our busy Western lives, making space for such a retreat is essential and restorative. It's a whole different experience than a vacation, or a structured teaching -- both which have undeniable and distinct value. Private retreat allows the space to just 'be', in a culture that urges us incessantly to 'do'. It gives rise to a clearing of the mind, rejuvenation of the body, and a flowering of the soul.

I've searched around and have found Vajrapani Institute to be most unique in offering an individual retreat for people of varied faiths and traditions. For me, it has been an ideal setting to go deeper into my own Yoga and meditation practice, take quiet walks in nature, photograph the majestic redwood country, read, rest and engage in lavish stretches of creative writing. The quiet, comfortable cabins and lovingly prepared vegetarian meals allow retreaters to tend to their own needs and passions, whatever they may be.

As a city dweller, I found it utterly engaging to observe the rich flora and fauna. The wildlife -- a bounty of birds, butterflies, squirrels, raccoons, and the enchanting families of deer -- never ceased to captivate me and provide a living source of inspiration for writing, photographing or just watching. And, although they don't advertise the humble creature as such, I made fast friends with a furry, whiskered resident teacher named Pearl, who through vast spells of napping and purring continually modeled a great lesson: Surrender!

On that note, I especially found it freeing to take a respite from the electronic rush of the phone and Internet, and sink into the gleaming green world around me. But it was helpful to be able to use those resources occasionally to check in with loved ones. The staff at Vajrapani was most accommodating, responding with such caring and conscientiousness to the many notes I sent back in my meal bag!

Although I do not have a Buddhist background, I felt totally welcomed, watched over and at home here. The people who serve at Vajrapani emanate a living kindness and a felt compassion. They bowed, nodded and respected my silence, but answered with alacrity if I reached out to them. I have been so touched by the caring here, it's peaked my own interest in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Wherever my path leads, this experience has deepened my reverence for life, my intent to help others and live as authentically as I can. That's, partly, the gift of clearing away distraction and being held in the arms of our sacred Mother Earth.

Before my retreat, I was slightly concerned that after weeks of silence, I might not want to speak again! On the contrary, I feel refreshed to return to my home in San Diego, with

a renewed zest for life, relationship, writing, community and spiritual practice. If anything, the stillness has helped me realize the value of our state of 'being' foundationally and then of choosing our thoughts, words and actions mindfully.

Life so generously carved out a spacious and lengthy retreat for me this year. But I've done much shorter stints that were of great value. A week or even a weekend retreat can restore and rekindle a sense of wonderment and harmony. It's truly a gift to yourself and to those whom you touch!