

[5 Things That Might Surprise You about Meditation Retreats](#)

It's not all calm and cosmic-flavored bubble gum.

Brent R. Oliver



The glory. The soothing waves of warm peach syrup flooding the folds of your brain. The sheer bliss of sitting still and letting ultimate peace Jägerbomb your delusions and peel away the spiky freakishness of daily existence. Breathe in, relax. Breathe out, super-mega relax, but still keep control of your sphincter. Calmness like honey on your nerve endings. A sniff of liberation somewhere down a candy corridor.

Stop reading now if this has been your only experience on meditation retreat. The rest of this article is not for you. Matter of fact, what are you even doing here? You should be in the backyard levitating.

Some of us—I'd guess most of us—have dealt with speed bumps on retreat that have left the suspension shot on our greater or lesser vehicles. Despite the pervasive image of the serene white meditator perched comfortably on her cushion, that's not what the majority of us go through. Popular culture—that massive slack-jawed glam juggernaut—has done everything in its power to portray meditation as the height of harmony and tranquility.

But a meditation retreat isn't all fuzzy kittens and cosmic-flavored bubble gum. And it's definitely not an enlightenment factory where people smile beatifically from the lotus position while their minds self-sanitize.

Here are five things you realize at a meditation retreat that are the opposite of peace and calm.

1. You're all alone here.

This one's counterintuitive because you're surrounded by people. You're sitting with a whole bunch of them, all day long, in the same space. You can see them *right there*. You're probably sleeping in a room with at least one other person, maybe several, which gives you nighttime access to all of their various sounds and aromas.

But you'll soon realize that you're essentially doing this solo. Most meditation retreats are completely silent. You won't be talking to the other meditators or really interacting with them at all. Eye contact is usually upside-down smiled upon, since our natural tendency upon meeting someone's gaze is to smile, nod, or say "Whassup?"

You'll be told to turn off your smartphone, tablet, laptop, heliograph, and whatever other equipment you brought that can reach the outside world. It's more or less up to you whether to use them when you're out of everyone else's sight and the temptation for an electronic fix is high. The retreat officials aren't going to kick in your door in the middle of the night to see if you're sexting your wife under the covers.

Pretty much the only voice you'll hear will be the teacher's. And that's limited to nightly talks about the dharma or meditation practice, not descriptions of the last *Walking Dead* episode or offers to update your Facebook status to "I miss *The Walking Dead*."

The teacher will also be the only person you speak to and it'll be for short scheduled interviews about your meditation practice. Again, you won't be discussing things that make you feel like a normal human, like food, sports, beer, and Twitter. The conversation will revolve entirely around getting better at sitting quietly.

All this can leave you feeling isolated, lonely, and twitchy. Which leads directly to...

2. You're completely crazy.

A meditation retreat is basically an opportunity to observe your mind non-stop. While popular portrayals suggest this leads quickly to less stress and better focus, what it actually leads to is the conclusion that you're totally insane. The only real question is whether you've always been *loco* or you went batshit because of the retreat.

If you've never spent much time just sitting and watching your mind, you're in for a real treat. And by "treat" I mean shocking nightmare. Sorry.

Your mind is essentially a demented rubber ball soaked in schizo juice and trapped in your skull. It's constantly bouncing off the walls and careening around everywhere, knocking over all your mental toys and denting your hopes and dreams. It leaps from one random subject to the next, never satisfied, never settling, never tiring, and really never making a bit of sense.

We often don't notice this in our daily lives because we're busy. Our lives are filled with work and jackass bosses and screaming children and irritated bank tellers and arguments on the Internet. We have things like hobbies, relationships, vacations, and car payments distracting us all the time. The minutiae of life effectively mask the constant yammering of our minds.

On a meditation retreat, you're forced to confront this head on. First time meditators are often blown away by the sheer speed and volume of their thoughts. The mind is like a lunatic tornado in there, and you're just one more trailer in the park it's tearing through.

Even experienced meditators who practice daily can be easily overcome by the ferocity of their minds. No one stops being surprised, amazed, weirded out, frustrated, scared, and disgusted by what's going on up there.

The retreat is all about letting go of all that and sitting in the eye of the tornado. But with whirling insanity around you at all times, it's hard not to get caught up in it. Especially when...

3. Sitting still is tough.

The more relaxed your body becomes, the more relaxed your mind becomes, too. I don't know if that's true or not, but it's a tenet of Zen meditation. The last time I asked a Zen teacher for clarification on this, he said, "Gravel is a soft pillow for the awakened head." Dammit.

Regardless, it's ridiculously hard to sit in one position all day. So in addition to realizing you have the brain of a serial-killer clown on PCP, you find your body isn't suited for motionlessness.

Most retreat days begin between 5 and 7 a.m. and run till around 9 p.m. There are usually periods of sitting meditation that last 30 to 45 minutes, followed by walking meditations of equal duration.

Walking gives you a chance to unfold your body, stretch, and limber up your muscles, which will return to a state of advanced rebellion faster than you thought possible. The first meditation session on the first day isn't so bad. You'll probably hop right up when it's time to walk. After the second session, you may notice some stiffness, but walking will get everything back in order.

After lunch, however, it starts to get intense. Parts of you will become uncomfortable almost the moment you sit down. Having lost circulation, other parts—important parts—will feel like they're about to fall off.

By the middle of the second day, sitting can become agony. Just the sight of your meditation cushion can become hateful and nauseating. It will feel like most of your joints have been filled

with powdered glass and your muscles are just sacs of fire and ice hanging from your cracking skeleton. Walking meditation becomes hobbling meditation, stretching meditation, or slowly-keeling-over-into-fetal-position meditation. It sucks, is what I'm saying.

It's even worse if you're older, less flexible, or have a chronic injury. A lot of retreatants can't sit on cushions on the floor and instead opt for chairs. Some people optimistically start out on the floor while silently judging those who don't. It's easy for a vague sense of superiority to set in. "I'm closer to the earth so my meditation will be better." "I'd never sit in a chair, it just doesn't feel right." "That guy only has three toes. What kind of place are they running here?"

Just wait. All too often those people who begin on the floor have to haul themselves into a chair the third day like a sloth climbing a tree. Or they build a bizarre meditation throne that's comprised of four cushions, three yoga blocks, two folded blankets, and a rolled-up sleeping bag, but is still technically on the floor.

Nothing stays comfortable for long. Even a chair is rotten after awhile. There's no position or piece of furniture that brings total physical relief. After a couple days, you'll be in some amount of pain no matter what you're sitting on or how often you fidget and adjust.

Of course there are a couple of people at every retreat who sit perfectly still the whole time. They plop down on just a single cushion, close their eyes, and turn into statues. Everyone hates those people, and that's the way it's supposed to be.

Try not to sit next to them (or anyone, for that matter) at dinner because...

4. Meals are awkward affairs.

Considering everything you're going through—the isolation, the mental and physical hardships—you might expect meals to be something of a respite. And they are, to a degree. When your day is prepackaged into walking and sitting and pretty much nothing else, even minor variances can be amazing. In fact, you can sometimes defeat the entire purpose of the retreat by just spending the time from breakfast on fantasizing about lunch, and then burn the whole afternoon thinking about dinner.

But that whole being silent thing really cranks up the discomfort at meals. You're sitting at a table with a bunch of other people, doing something you do several times each day, but you've never done it like this. No conversation. No comments on the food. No "Please pass the organic vegan hot sauce." Only the sound of everyone chewing, slurping, coughing, belching, sucking their teeth, grunting, and smacking their lips.

Now you're avoiding eye contact not out of respect for the rules, but because everyone has become a hideous beast, including you. You're supposed to be paying strict attention to eating, watching the whole experience of the meal with the same attention you've been watching your mind. But it's tough to get through a meal when no one is allowed to say a word. It messes with the unwritten social contract. Sometimes even a week of meals in the retreat vacuum isn't enough to adjust to the change.

And speaking of change, you're about to experience a jarring one because...

5. Returning to the outside world can be overwhelming.

There are inspiring moments during any retreat. Whether they're fleeting or sustained, there are times when the pain and awkwardness and strangeness fall away and you're left with something sublime. Stillness. Joy. Clarity. Insight. Peace. Those moments make it easier to believe that this practice is positively affecting your life. Sometimes they even reinforce the idea that enlightenment is real and attainable and that you're on the right path. Your resolve is bolstered. Your commitment to meditation, to kindness, to compassion and liberation become powerful and radiant. You sit like a buddha.

Then you're shoved back into the world outside the retreat center and your face melts off. You turn your phone on and it almost explodes from everything you've missed. Calls, texts, and emails come pouring in. You realize that for the past couple of days you haven't been missing videos of cats walking on their hind legs. You haven't wondered if Pat Robertson said something stupid (he did). You haven't worried that you should've gotten the new iPhone instead of an Android.

On the drive home you're assaulted with more color, noise, and sensations in five minutes than you've had over the last week. It's like getting out of a sensory deprivation tank and falling into a frat party, except you're not wet and naked. (Hell, maybe you are. I don't know how you party.)

You've slowed down, quieted down, and now the world is reintroducing you to its humongous hustle and belligerent bustle. Put that serenity to work! You didn't just spend seven days sitting wordlessly in one damn spot just to fall apart a mile from the center, did you?

By the time you get home, the first layer of your peace has already been abraded. Your calm is no match for the world. It was fragile during the retreat. Out here, it's just a shadow.

Spouses, children, pets, friends: they're all the same as you left them a week ago. But you're raw and their impacts drive more deeply than before. That television that's always on used to be just background noise. Now it's a violation. The fact that the house is never really quiet used to be comforting. Now it's nerve-wracking.

Everything jumps right back at you full-tilt. On Monday you're back at your job after a bad night's sleep.

As you reintegrate with the world, you may start to notice that some things are better. Maybe you don't get mad as quickly. Maybe you find your normal stress level has dropped a bit. Maybe people like you better because you don't get drunk every Thursday night at Hooters and throw wings at the hostess anymore.

But, hey, it's the little things. Remember that time you thought you were crazy?

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