

Preparing Yourself and Your Home for a Virtual Retreat Kara Braun & Stephen Villaescusa

During UM's Immersion May 2020 Retreat, we presented a panel, "*Mindfulness in the Home*" that shared how to bring the *monastery retreat experience* into the home by creating sacred, enriching, & joyful, spaces and activities in which to practice.

Since Covid-19 has made virtual retreats a necessity, we now offer our thoughts on how to prepare yourself and your home for a stay at home retreat and the benefits for doing so.

Although a virtual home retreat may seem challenging, it can also be quite rewarding – especially if you have an effective strategy. Here are three simple suggestions for that:

- Minimize Distractions
- Create a Conducive Home Retreat Environment
- Explore Aspects to Enhance Your Retreat Experience and Sustain it Far Beyond the Retreat

Let's explore each of the above:

1. Minimizing Distractions

In the silent, simplified, slow, and orderly environment of a residential meditation retreat, distractions are minimized. It is easy to go deep into your experiences. However in a virtual retreat, it takes careful planning and communication with others to establish a schedule, minimize distractions, and create an effective retreat environment in your home.

Many of us live with other people. We need to advise them of how to support our practice during the retreat schedule while still attending to their needs and ours.

Our homes also come with chores, responsibilities, and schedules: think meals, children, pets, plants, and the like. Prepare and plan ahead. Can you balance these activities or turn them into an object of focus? During the June 2020 Shinzen Retreat, in the intense 105-degree Sonoran Desert heat, I had to water my outside plants three times a day. With full attention, it was compelling, restful, and nurturing.

Unified Mindfulness Head Trainer Julianna Raye also offers ten rock-solid tips for participating in a virtual home retreat.

1. Practice in silence to improve concentration and sensory clarity
2. Maintain good posture – Feel free to sit in a chair, on a cushion or use a meditation bench
3. Turn your phone off
4. Take a social media break
5. Stay home – plan your meals in advance
6. Intentionally practice with daily life activities: eating, bathing, chores, etc.
7. Handle distractions mindfully and with equanimity
8. Designate a room or spaces for practice in stillness and in motion
9. Modulate what does this mean your own retreat and take breaks as you need them
10. Journal writing and notes can be quite useful for exploration and reflection

2. Creating A Conducive Home Retreat Environment

As Covid-19 has shown us, sometimes we have little control over our situation, even on the best of days. What we always have is the capacity to imagine and create, through our attitude and choices, a spirit and mood of contemplative reverence. Think of the opportunity to go on retreat in your home as an opening to engage with all the aspects of your day-to-day environment in new and meaningful ways.

Even the most mundane objects, routines, chores, and responsibilities can become invitations to practice – and in doing so, come alive to you, in ways you never imagined possible. Being on retreat in your home has tremendous potential to grow and strengthen your mindfulness practice in daily life muscles. A home retreat offers more benefits than a residential retreat because you can practice with the things you do, every day, in ordinary life.

In the silent, simplified, slow and orderly environment of a residential meditation retreat, distractions are minimized. You can soak into your experiences. Attention sharpens. You can see, hear, feel, and appreciate precious details in the present moment that normally would be overlooked. For example, bird songs sound rapturous. You can feel the warm caress of the sun and the softness of a gentle breeze through all your sense gates. You have the time to eat your meals slowly, while mindfully appreciating the smells, texture, taste and the sequence of human connection and activities that carried the food to your plate.

With focused attention, the mindful moments of a residential retreat can also be cultivated in our homes. Think of your home as your partner. You are a team supporting each other in appreciating and living life - the full spectrum of life, from birth to death, at its fullest. Being on retreat in your home is a golden opportunity to get to know your home environment intimately – to love it in new ways, to care for it in new ways, to see it more clearly, to invite it to come close to you and become part of your practice, and your life in rich and rewarding ways.

- First, establish your intention. “Intention is the capacity to stay in touch with what is of prime importance to you, from moment to moment, in your daily life. Staying grounded in your intention shifts how your mind and heart respond to circumstances. Mindful intention allows your deeper values and your sense of purpose to become the foundation of your experience.” *
Phillip Moffit “Emotional Chaos to Clarity”

What do you want to learn, practice, develop, or improve? How do you want to feel? Is there a behavior, thought, or action that you want to initiate, eliminate, or strengthen? Who is the person you want to be? What do you want to contribute to yourself, family, community, or the world?

Write your intention(s) down in the present tense in positive terms. For example:

- I intend to live each day with greater awareness in the present moment.
 - I intend to stop taking things personally.
 - I intend to be less judgmental and more compassionate to myself and others.
 - I intend to bring my mindfulness into my daily life activities.
- Imagine the ways in which your home is ready and waiting to support your practice. How does your home inspire creativity, playfulness, rest, and relaxation? In what ways does your home flow, seem

to have movement, positivity and maybe even sacredness unto itself? It might be about design, objects, or rituals – nurture what works well, those aspects you appreciate and enjoy.

- How does your home reflect and inspire your values? For Kara this is about the many aspects in which her home invites her to be slow and the ways it creates ease. She has as few objects as possible and places high priority on tools that make her work easy in the kitchen like good knives and a well-designed vegetable peeler. She makes her home warm, inviting, and beautiful with candles, soft lighting, nature objects and cozy blankets.

For Stephen, his plants, gardens, and pets are techniques to nourish himself and his family. They are also doorways to practice and reminders of the interconnectedness of life and the Beloved. Everyday is different, determined in large part, by the seasons, temperature, and moisture in his Sonoran Desert home.

- Establish your focus range. You might invite your entire home or specific spaces and activities to become your “object of focus” to apply Concentration, Sensory Clarity, and Equanimity. For example, put your full attention on daily tasks often done unconsciously or automatically. Can you establish a ritual by attending to the small details and create something special and nourishing from the ordinary?
 - Taking a shower
 - Getting dressed
 - Making breakfast
 - Feeding a pet
 - Bringing in the mail
 - Washing dishes
 - A favorite object like a tea kettle or slippers - care for these objects with love and appreciation
 - A time of day - pausing to appreciate the light and shadows
 - Random noises - hearing children at play, dogs barking, train whistles
- Apply UM techniques whenever you can. Let your home reveal itself to you. See Hear, Feel is an excellent starting option. See, Hear, Feel, Rest may be available too (notice the sleeping cat or dog). See, Hear, Feel, Flow (noticing rain, hearing the dishwasher, feeling wind). See, Hear, Feel, Good (a piece of artwork, favorite photo, music, smell, or activity). Note Gone (every time you turn a light switch on.)
- You can also create sensory experiences within your home. Make your bed nicely (See Rest, Feel Good), place flowers on the table (See Good Feel Good), make a warm cup of tea (See Flow, Feel Good), smile intentionally at a passing neighbor (See Good, Feel Good), turn on the garden hose and watch the water flow onto the plants or on your feet (See Flow, Feel Flow), remove clutter from a shelf (See Rest, Feel Rest),
- Pay attention to the special parts and routines of your home and garden that you love. See them as moments for mindfulness, little prayers – gifts of presence offered to you, day after day.

- If there is something challenging in your home, see if you can bring sensory clarity to the situation – what thoughts do you notice, what emotions? Without any expectation, see if you can untangle any of what is difficult – and then modify any of the elements, behavior or thinking.
- Play with Auto Move. If interesting, choose a routine or ritual (brushing your teeth, making coffee or a smoothie); notice as many parts of the ritual as you can, try to replicate these details and begin to notice the automaticity in doing this ritual.
- Observe and appreciate Expansion and Contraction, within moments, hours, days, weeks, seasons, and lifetimes. Notice the ways in which your home breathes and invites you to breathe with it. One of the ways to do this is to bring nature into your home.
- Welcome and create ways for your home to support you in caring for yourself. Where are the spiritual catnaps in your home?
- Fewer things generally equal = less thinking = peace, rest, calm.
- Create practice reminders; visual cues (perhaps index cards strategically placed with practice tips, strategies, techniques i.e. See Rest; post phrases, denote meaning to objects).
- Remember, every part of your practice will have an impact on those around you.
- Explore, innovate, have fun.

3. Explore Aspects to Enhance Your Retreat Experience and Sustain it Far Beyond the Retreat

You can use micro-hits, background practice or formal practice in any of these.

- Decide where you want to establish your indoor sitting area(s).
- Explore ways to enhance the atmosphere:
 - Lighting
 - Windows
 - Stillness
 - Silence
 - Candles
 - Incense
 - Chimes
 - Music
 - Flowers and Plants
 - Pets
 - Photos
 - Follow the shadows of the sun

- Sunrise, Sunset, Moon
 - Nature sounds
- Play with Practice in Motion
 - Walking
 - Yoga
 - Qigong
 - Exercise
 - Biking
 - Running
 - Swimming
 - Stretching
 - Playing with your pet
- Enjoy Sitting in Nature
 - Patio
 - Garden
 - Fountain
 - Under a tree
 - Pool
 - Jacuzzi
- Celebrate Your Meals
 - Creating a menu
 - Shopping
 - Food preparation
 - Food presentation
 - Mindful eating
- Plan Your Clothing
 - Select comfortable, loose clothing that you enjoy being in
- Be Mindful in Self-Care
 - Bathroom
 - Bathing
 - Brushing your teeth
 - Shaving
 - Brushing hair
- Enjoy Rest
 - Visual rest
 - Sonic rest
 - Napping
 - Sleep

- Bring Your Practice to Housekeeping and Caring for Others
 - Chores – dishes, trash, cleaning, sweeping, watering.....
 - Children
 - Spouse or partner
 - Family
 - Others
 - Animals
 - Plants

What are the benefits of bringing the monastery experience in your home? Mirabai Starr describes it poetically in her book, *“Wild Mercy”*.

“Encounters with the sacred that radiate from the core of the ordinary embolden you to cultivate stillness and simple awareness. In the midst of a world that is begging you to distract yourself, this is no easy practice. Yet you keep showing up. You are indomitable. You are thirsty for wonder... (practice) is about becoming as fully present as possible to the realities of the human experience. In showing up for what is, no matter how pedestrian or tedious, how aggravating, or shameful, the what is begins to reveal itself as imbued with holiness. How do we make space in our lives for this kind of sacred seeing?”