

RETREAT DIARY

First day

I arrive at 5pm, tired but relieved. It's already dark – black clouds covering a full moon. I meet the retreat leader, a tall skinny man with something of the Ancient Mariner about him. We walk from the gate to the main complex in silence. I am settled into a medium size dorm.

Second day

The bell goes at 5am. I open my eyes only to realise I have not slept. We cross the yard and enter a large shrine room and, having taken a cushion, assume a cross-legged posture. Up front is a large painting of a green skinned wild-eyed individual riding a tiger. I recognise the image as one of the maha siddhas.

Third day

Today follows the same routine as yesterday – and again, no sleep. Food is basic, i.e. rice and watery soup, and no eating after mid-day. We meditate, with occasional leg stretches, from 5 until 11pm. There is no talking, and very little eye contact.

Fourth day

A bizarre cast of characters on this retreat. Perhaps half a dozen monks, the rest lay. All of them westerners. A few have dropped out already. I have come close a hundred times a day to doing the same. They all have that bright – but haunted look – of those who are meditating seriously.

Fifth day

One of the retreatants gives me a box of incense. I do not know what this means – if indeed it means anything. The mantras begin today.

Sixth day

Pain – all over the body – is becoming a real issue now. Within thirty seconds of sitting it begins. Nothing to be done but to just take it. The pleasure when it does come is intense, orgasmic. Have a modest realisation: pain and pleasure are inextricably tied to one another – the craving of the one producing the fear of the other.

Seventh day

Good series of sits today. Experiencing rapture and a sense of vast space. Managing to kind of trick my ‘self’ into not reacting to the pain – or the pleasure. This seems to diminish the former – but not the latter. There is a sense of lightness in the body. At times there is no sense of a body at all.

Eight day

Another good day. Two-hour sits seemed to start and finish within a few seconds. A certain disbelief accompanies this. Find myself pushing things – thought and words – until they lose their sense and become absurd. A stammering of experience. This oscillates with the sudden appearance of very early childhood memories.

Towards the end of the day a new phenomena: beginning to ‘see’ things in my practice. Last sit of the day a red dakini drinking blood from a skullcap. Around her

neck a string of skulls – in her other hand a vajra knife. She smiles at me – invitingly.

Ninth day

‘Visions’ as I call them coming thick and fast now. Red, blue, green dakini’s. Black, burning, wrathful deities. I recognise them from my reading of the teachings. Trying to ignore them – focus on the breath – on the body – but it is not easy. Am beginning to see them away from the meditation. Walking back to the dormitory, I glimpse a movement from the corner of my eye and a fleeting demon body – small and quick – darting between buildings. Before sleep I am surrounded by a shuddering host of presences.

Tenth day

I am in a procession walking through the grounds of some house – possibly the retreat centre. People – some look like my fellow retreatants – are holding flares. We arrive at a clearing in which a bonfire has been assembled. The fire is lit and there is some chanting. Everyone seems to be going along with this fine – acting as if everything is normal. But it’s not. I can tell something is not right. The whole atmosphere has a badness about it. There is a kind of *ſarvas* theme tune going on the whole time but at some kind of subliminal level that only I seem to be aware of. The chanting continues. Something is going to happen. Someone is going to arrive. Someone is going to arrive and do something terrible. The theme tune is building to a crescendo – can these people not see that something VERY WRONG is about to happen? I am panicking now – I have got to make them see, understand. I start shouting – knocking into people – I am pretty scared and it shows.

It is then that I realise – with an instantaneous clarity – that it is ‘me’, and my actions as I am performing them right at that moment, that I am dreading. I wake up surprised – and very, very scared.

Eleventh day

The death of a hundred cuts. A practice which took place – and still does – in rural China. The victim to be punished is tied up in the village square and each day a different part of his body is cut off. Beginning with the feet, the hands, and so on. The wounds are sealed and the victim is kept alive – witnessing his processual reduction – with massive amounts of morphine. Eventually only the head – and one or two of the internal organs (i.e. the lungs) remain. This image has been haunting me all day.

The retreat finishes.