



ACRAYA

SANCTUARIES FOR SPIRITUAL WANDERERS



A Loving Guide for Your Dark Retreat

CULTIVATING INNER CONNECTION

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WELCOME

Welcome to Your Dark Retreat Journey

Welcome to an exceptional and unusual experience.

We understand that you may be feeling a mixture of excitement and perhaps even a little nervousness as you prepare to immerse yourself in a world of complete darkness and stillness.

Before entering, please take a moment to read through this guide. Once you are inside the retreat, we remain available to you and will answer any questions that arise. Let us begin.

A dark retreat can be a life-changing experience, whether you stay for a few days or several months. It is unlike anything you have known before, so we invite you to approach it with an open mind and heart, and with minimal expectations.

While some guests hope to see extraordinary visions or lights, or to reach enlightenment, these outcomes are never guaranteed — though they are possible. In our experience, those who enter without expectation often have the most remarkable journeys. By releasing expectation, you protect yourself from disappointment and open yourself to what is truly here.

VISIONS & BOREDOM

Two Common Companions

During the retreat you may meet many experiences, but two tend to arise for almost everyone: visions and boredom.

Visions can be exhilarating and illuminating, yet they can also be unsettling or difficult to sit with, especially if they persist for long stretches. Remember that visions and light experiences are not the ultimate aim of a dark retreat. The aim is to seek something that transcends all phenomena and personal perception. Visions come and go; you are simply their observer.

Not everyone experiences visions, so it is unwise to anticipate them or to read their absence as a personal failure. Trust that your experience will unfold exactly as it should.

Dealing with Boredom

In the midst of a dark retreat, boredom may arise. Acknowledge it and accept it for what it is. Not every moment needs to be filled with excitement or revelation. Allow yourself to feel boredom, frustration, racing thoughts and physical discomfort, just as you would welcome peace, pleasure and stillness.

Rather than trying to relieve boredom, try to move into the feeling itself. Meet the moment as a mystery, free of any expectation of what comes next. Simply being — whether in boredom or in bliss — can be deeply rewarding.

Avoid filling the space with plans and mental activity. The stories the mind creates hold no inherent truth and gain power only when engaged. Observed as passing phenomena, their intensity fades, leaving the true observer intact. Boredom is not to be avoided, but embraced.

INTERCONNECTEDNESS

You Are Never Alone in the Dark

As soon as you enter the dark retreat, you become connected to all those who have already passed through this experience, and to those inside it now. This connection reaches beyond the limits of time and space, offering a sense of security even in the most challenging moments.

The key to meeting difficulty is to accept it, rather than fight against it.

Allow whatever comes to be present, even when it feels difficult, knowing that you are in a safe place and held by countless unseen forces.

You will not physically perish. Release resistance and let the mystery unravel from one moment to the next. This experience is temporary; it will pass. It is only one moment among the many moments of your life.



BREATHWORK

Deep Breathing

To begin, find a comfortable seated or lying position and place your hands on your belly. Take a slow breath in through your nose, letting your stomach expand, then exhale gently through your nose. Repeat for as long as you wish, allowing the breath to deepen naturally, without forcing it.

This simple yet effective practice stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system — the body’s “rest and digest” state — softening the fight-or-flight response and cultivating relaxation and safety.

Focusing on Your Breath

Many meditative traditions invite us to rest attention on the breath. It is a simple practice: gently notice each inhalation, each exhalation, and even the quiet pauses in between.

Returning again and again to the breath establishes a felt sense of calm, ease and mindfulness. Whenever the mind drifts, the breath is always waiting, here, to receive you.

COUNTING THE BREATH

A Practice for Concentration

To cultivate mindfulness, try this breathing exercise. Count each in-breath and out-breath as one, then continue to two, three, and so on, up to seven. Begin again, this time counting to fourteen, then twenty-one, and beyond. If you lose track or pass your intended number, simply return to one and start afresh.

This exercise trains the mind to rest wholly on the rhythm of your breathing.

“Breath is the bridge which connects life to consciousness, which unites your body to your thoughts. Whenever your mind becomes scattered, use your breath as the means to take hold of your mind again.”

— THICH NHAT HANH

MEDITATION & MINDFULNESS

Observing Thoughts

Imagine watching your thoughts as cars passing on a street. You need not study each one — its colour, make or model. Let them pass while simply acknowledging their presence. Let thoughts come and go without engaging their content or origin. Be the impartial observer as they flow in and out of awareness.

Object of Concentration

Choose an object to anchor the mind — the breath, the counting practice, an image that inspires you, or a concept that evokes spaciousness, such as “compassion” or “infinity.” Whenever attention wanders, gently return it to your chosen anchor.

Self-Inquiry

Pose the question, “Who am I?” — beyond my body, my thoughts, my memories, my personality. Who is the one residing within this retreat? Who is experiencing pain, boredom or distraction? As you hold this inquiry, an answer may emerge within the silence and the mystery.

Metta Bhavana — Lovingkindness

Cultivate loving-kindness, beginning with yourself. Repeat these phrases gently, and in time allow your own words to arise:

May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I be safe.

May I live with ease. May I be loved.

May I feel belonging. May I be free of anxiety.

The Factory of Thoughts

Q. You said we tend to be too caught in our thoughts and should rest more in the back of the mind. When I tried, I felt disconnected, because I was actively trying to reach that state.

A. First, it helps to free ourselves from the constant stream of thought that originates in the front of the mind. Battling our thoughts only feeds them. Instead, release the mental factory and, for a time, let attention settle behind the head — toward the base of the skull, where energy gathers. Doing so, we notice a profound relaxation and openness. This is a temporary anchor, a stepping stone toward a deeper experience, not a fixed technique.

Q. How do I keep it from becoming a technique?

A. Through repetition you will find this relaxation is natural and organic. Once you have glimpsed the extraordinary quality of the mind in this state, you gravitate toward it effortlessly. Do not over-focus on the process or harden it into a method. Consider it a personal secret — an insight to be cherished, not emphasised.

Ho'oponopono

Ho'oponopono is a traditional Hawaiian practice of healing and reconciliation. Its name means “to make right.” It rests on the belief that by taking responsibility for our own thoughts, actions and emotions, we can bring healing to ourselves and to the world around us. Repeat these phrases in any order, silently or aloud.

I'm sorry (Kala) — acknowledge the need for forgiveness, taking responsibility for our actions and feelings.

Please forgive me (Oluolu) — seek forgiveness of others and of the universe; we all err, and we can all transform.

Thank you (Mahalo) — turn toward gratitude and the healing it carries.

I love you (Aloha) — a universal force that heals and unites, opening us to forgiveness and transformation.

A GENTLE ATTITUDE

Seeing the Mind as a Child

Approach the mind as you would a young child.

Once you have chosen your focal point, you may hold it for several minutes, only to find yourself drawn into a memory, a story or a plan.

Rather than scolding yourself or sinking into despair, offer yourself compassion and picture the mind as a small child. Just as children struggle to stay with one task, so does the mind.

Shower it with love and gently guide it back, inviting it to try again. Like a child, the mind will gradually mature, learning to rest for longer without distraction.



SORROW & JOY

“Sorrow prepares you for joy. It violently sweeps everything out of your house, so that new joy can find space to enter. It shakes the yellow leaves from the bough of your heart, so that fresh, green leaves can grow in their place. It pulls up the rotten roots, so that new roots hidden beneath have room to grow. Whatever sorrow shakes from your heart, far better things will take their place.”

— RUMI

DEATH

“The fear of death follows from the fear of life. A person who lives fully is prepared to die at any time.”

— MARK TWAIN

CONSCIOUSNESS

“Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.”

— C. G. JUNG

SOMATIC PRACTICES

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Begin at the toes and work slowly up to the head. Tense each muscle group for a few seconds, then release, noticing the contrast between tension and ease.

This practice releases physical tension and brings awareness to bodily sensation, aiding grounding and relaxation.

Grounding Techniques

Grounding can be as simple as feeling the feet firmly on the earth, holding an object and studying its texture, or imagining roots extending from the body into the ground. Taking a shower, brushing your teeth, sipping water, or gently tapping the body all serve.

These are simple yet potent ways to return to the present moment — especially if you feel dissociated (“checked out”) or overwhelmed by emotion.

SOMATIC PRACTICES — RELEASING THROUGH THE BODY

SELF-HUG

Cross your arms over your chest, hands resting on the opposite shoulders. Squeeze and release, adding a gentle rocking if it feels good. This mimics the comfort of being held and can awaken feelings of safety.

FREE MOVEMENT

Let the body move as it wishes, with no aim for structure. Movements can be large or subtle — simply let the body lead. This discharges excess energy and tension, allowing emotional release and a greater sense of well-being.

CHI-SHAKING

Allow the body to shake, tremble or vibrate spontaneously. A few minutes releases muscular tension and soothes the nervous system, helping to move stress or trauma. One of the most powerful somatic practices — a reminder of the body's innate wisdom to self-regulate and heal.

STOMPING

Stomp one foot, then the other, into the ground — softly at first, then with more intensity. Let the arms, torso and head join the rhythm. Both a grounding practice and a release of pent-up energy or emotion.

GROANING

Make a low sound from the throat — a vocal expression of pain, pleasure, relief or any strong emotion. A powerful way to channel and release stored tension through sound, deepening the connection between feeling and body.

BUTTERFLY HUG

Cross your arms so your hands rest near the collarbones, forming a butterfly's wings. Tap each hand in turn, creating gentle bilateral stimulation. The rhythmic tapping is calming and grounding, especially in moments of distress or overwhelm.



interrupt anxiety with *gratitude*.

interrupt worry with *breath*.

interrupt anger with *movement*.

interrupt sadness with *laughter*.

interrupt fear with *action*.

INITIATION & RITES OF PASSAGE

At its heart, initiation is a search for belonging and acceptance, and the marking of a transformative moment in a life. To “initiate” simply means to start, to begin.

Our modern culture is often afraid to begin, and yet beginning is essential to life. Traditionally, initiation marks the start of a process of remembrance — an inward journey. As Plato said, all true learning is the soul remembering itself.

In modern, secular terms, the inward work of initiation is the making of the unconscious, conscious. It is often described as a felt, bodily experience of the dream-like nature of reality, and of the soul’s quiet immortality. The difference between holding these as ideas and living them as felt experience is vast. The difference is fear.

The purpose of any real initiation is to cleanse the soul of fear, and of the ignorance that fear breeds. Any true initiation will bring you face to face with your core fears. You might pause and ask yourself, honestly, where you stand:

Are you still afraid of death?

Are you still afraid of the disapproval or rejection of others?

Do you hesitate to be honest about who you are and what you want, for fear of offending?

Any real initiation gradually loosens the fear of death and the fear of others’ disapproval — making way for a more honest, more enjoyable life, with far more intimacy, love and freedom.

INTEGRATION

This is the remembrance of our true nature — a nature almost all of us forget as we slip into incarnation. It is a grand thing, and it can be a rough ride, for remembrance brings to the surface everything within us that resists dwelling in the felt joy of love. This can be a shock to the ordinary ego, as its strategies and barriers to happiness are laid bare.

Making Daily Life Sacred

Integration is not about bringing spirituality into daily life; it is about making daily life more sacred. Every moment holds the potential to be sacred when we become truly aware of it, present to the full spectrum of our feeling. It is the practice of infusing ordinary existence with a deeper presence.

As you emerge from the retreat, you may feel more vulnerable and sensitive — both a gift and a challenge. You become finely attuned to your emotions and intuition, and clearer about your boundaries, needs and sources of pain.

The real test is whether you can keep this inner connection as you return to work, parenting, relationships and important decisions. Integration means meeting daily life with heightened awareness, so that instead of repeating old patterns you can notice them and choose consciously.

The retreat is where you nurture inner connection; daily life is where you put it into practice. Integration can span months, even years.

PRACTICAL INTEGRATION

Carrying the Light Home

1

TIME FOR REFLECTION

Dedicate moments to process and reflect. Journaling, contemplative walks in nature, or quiet meditation are simple ways to return to your experience.

2

SOLACE IN COMMUNITY

Share with a few trusted friends, or a therapist or counsellor, if your experience calls for it. Voicing your thoughts and feelings helps you understand and integrate them. Take time to ground the experience within yourself first, and notice whether you are seeking outer validation or simply a listening ear.

3

PRIORITISE SELF-CARE

Embrace routines of movement, nourishing food and adequate rest. Physical well-being helps you feel grounded and supports integration.

4

NURTURE SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

If you hold rituals — prayer, tai chi, breathwork, meditation — continue them. Your retreat may have deepened your spiritual connection, and these practices help profound insight take root.

5

BRING INSIGHT INTO ACTION

Let your insights guide real change — in relationships, work, or daily habits. Integration is ongoing, and it is natural to adapt as you go. There is no rush. Take your time to feel which changes are needed.

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Daily Reflection

MY PERSONAL PRAYER

TODAY'S MOMENTS OF JOY

INTENTION FOR DARK RETREAT

DAILY GRATITUDE LIST

NOTE TO SELF

Self-Care

CHECKLIST

- ☐ MAKE YOUR BED
- ☐ MEDITATION
- ☐ CUDDLE A PET OR HUMAN
- ☐ HEALTHY MEALS
- ☐ GO FOR A WALK
- ☐ CLEANING HOUSE
- ☐ WASHING CLOTHES
- ☐ LISTEN TO MUSIC
- ☐ HAVE A POWER NAP
- ☐ SOCIAL-MEDIA BREAK
- ☐ TAKE A LONG BATH
- ☐ GET A MASSAGE
- ☐ CALL A FRIEND OR FAMILY
- ☐ MAKE TIME TO READ
- ☐ TIME IN NATURE
- ☐ TRY A NEW RESTAURANT
- ☐ TRY A NEW RECIPE
- ☐ NO PHONE 60 MIN BEFORE BED

MOVEMENT

☐ CARDIO ☐ STRETCH ☐ YOGA ☐ DANCE ☐ REST ☐ SWIMMING

HOURS OF SLEEP

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

MOOD

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

ANGRY TIRED SAD CALM HAPPY

A CLOSING STORY

Let Go of the Ground

“How do you get to be so free?” Caterpillar asks wistfully of Butterfly.

“Surrender,” Butterfly whispers as she flutters by.

“But I’ve read all the books, taken all the classes, and I just can’t seem to get off the ground.”

“Surrender.”

“What do you mean, ‘surrender’? Surrender to what?”

“To the Mystery. To your Creator. To your own DNA.”

“How do I do that?” Caterpillar frowns.

“Climb up in that tree, let go of the branch, and spin.”

“Spin?” — “Yes, spin.”

“But I don’t know how to spin. Do I need a course? Is there a manual?”

“You’ll know. Once you’re up there on the branch.”

“What happens next? Do I spin my own wings?”

“No, silly,” Butterfly giggles. “You spin a cocoon.”

“A cocoon? What do I do with it once I’ve spun it?”

“You don’t do anything. You just wait. Inside the cocoon.”

“What good does waiting do? I have too much work — housework, children to feed... well, that’s just ridiculous.” Caterpillar turns away, her eyes back on the ground.

“Then you’d better give up your dream of flying, because that’s the only way to get up here.”

Butterfly’s wings carry her a little higher.

Caterpillar glances back at the sky. Her eyes fill with tears. “But I really want to fly. Can you tell me a little more? What comes next?”

“The hard part. The surrender.”

“What am I surrendering?”

“Everything you ever knew. Every cell of your body. Every story you’ve ever told yourself.”

“Does it hurt?” — “Oh yes. It hurts.”

“You have to surrender to the pain and trust the process. Let your body turn to an ugly, gooey, mushy substance while you wait for transformation. It will be the hardest thing you ever do.”

“Do you want to taste the sky?”

“Oh yes. I really, really do.”

“Then you have to let go of the ground.”



— THE ART OF HOLDING SPACE, HEATHER PLETT

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