

Calling A Retreat, “A Retreat” THE FAMILY RETREAT

“Pancakes!” the call echoes up the hill of the retreat center, as young people of all ages stream down to the Dining Hall, faces sleepy, smiling and open.

The last morning of the five-day 2002 Family Retreat at the Spirit Rock Retreat Center has dawned bright and crisp. Having the “beloved pancakes” for breakfast this morning is a big deal because as anyone who has been a yogi knows, we eat what is offered at the meal during our time on retreat. Sometimes we like it better than others.

What is unusual about this retreat is the age of the yogis participating in this level of renunciation. Fifty young people, mainly between the ages of five and fifteen attend this retreat with their parents each year. At the Family Retreat, we turn off our cell phones, our CD headphones, and our Gameboys. We put away scooters and trading cards. There are no computers or televisions to be found. So what is it exactly that inspires families to flock to this retreat year after year?

Maybe these families simply enjoy a challenge. The Family Retreat meets the practice of the participants exactly where they are – in intimate family relationship, the place of discovery of all of our conditioning, as well as of deep wisdom and compassion. Similar to retreat experience itself, life in families is a fountain of richness and challenges. On the Family Retreat, Mara (“the Hindrances”) visits in the form of whiny tired young voices, aversion at the retreat guidelines from teenage voices, and doubt in the minds of many parents. When we practice engaged dharma and Mara visits through the mouth of our child or spouse, it is sometimes even harder to remember to call it by its’ true name “sleepiness, or aversion, or doubt”. Can we remember that the Hindrances largely fade away by the third day of the retreat? True to the magic of the retreat form, I have also observed it to be true at the Family Retreat.

Of course the joy of the Buddha’s teachings is that he not only taught us to identify and understand our suffering, but he also taught ways leading to the end of suffering. It is particularly inspiring to watch the fruit of the practice being cultivated in our children. What follows are many heartfelt moments of the dharma at work at the 2002 Family Retreat.

The peace and calm that descended over the participants this last retreat was surprising to many. As one Family Council parent laughingly said to me, “It’s almost too calm.” Not to give anyone the wrong idea, the days were filled with merrymaking and activity. Drumming, cowbells, singing, and dancing called us to the Courtyard several times a day to make the procession into the Meditation Hall. Dharma skits and songs from the young people punctuated meditation and dharma teachings. The daily practice schedule flowed between periods of family dharma in the meditation hall, periods of young people’s groups and parent dharma, and free time. Within all this, each participant uniquely responded to “the call to come home to who we really are”, the calm arising from the resulting feeling of settledness and safety. The equanimity that the twenty-some

volunteers, the cooks, the retreat staff and Events Assistant (Roger Burns) brought to the process and container of the retreat could be tangibly felt within the mood of the retreat. Today, my gratitude to their practice and service is undiminished.

Walking into the Dining Hall at breakfast, my eyes were drawn to two families joyously connecting at a table near the tea urn, while next to them a parent held another parent in tears. The thousand joys and thousand sorrows of existence revealed before everyone present.

One morning, I observed an eleven-year-old boy spontaneously enter into walking meditation on the stairs of the Council House, as his friends played dharma games nearby. That this boy could respond to this sudden call within himself to formally practice mindfulness is miraculous.

As parents meditated in silence one afternoon, strains of the younger children singing “We are a circle, within a circle, with no beginning, and never-ending” filtered through the Meditation Hall. At the Family Retreat, the invitation is to allow all experience into the practice, the singing children reminding everyone of the interdependence of our hearts.

I will always remember the generosity of the adolescent who brought me a piece of pizza, after a long discussion about how to work with his anxiety and aversion around being on retreat. “Even on silent retreats, sometimes it is the most skillful for a certain yogi to take a break and go get some pizza,” I told him and his father. So they did, and later the same adolescent gave me a genuine smile and a “two thumbs up” when I asked him how the retreat was going for him. It seemed that he was truly discovering the joys of self-acceptance and understanding the changing nature of experience (impermanence).

The Family Retreat ended with a beautiful Forgiveness Practice offered by Ajahn Amaro. The depth for his teachings once again inspired everyone, as he reminded us, “We were all each other’s mothers during one of our many lifetimes”. Families tied protection cords around each other’s wrists, as each member offered the others forgiveness. Some participants continue to wear their protection cords to this day.

This is our family practice. Stillness and activity, silence and communication, joy and sorrow, moving smoothly through the many transitions of our moment-to-moment lives. Holding nothing out of our hearts, we experience what it means to be fully human. At the Family Retreat, we learn to connect with our own hearts, the heart of our family, and the heart of the human family.

As many people know, I have been attending the long retreat at Spirit Rock every winter since the retreat center was constructed (this winter I will be on retreat in Feb. and March). I can honestly say that the depth of the dharma teachings I have personally received during my two years teaching the Family Retreat, is comparable only to those long retreats. The fullness I carry in my heart for the sincerity of practice of each Family Retreat family is beyond words. Thank you!

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