

ANDREW HOLECEK

**TOTAL
ECLIPSE
OF THE
MIND**

**UNLEASHING THE POWER OF
DARKNESS FOR CREATIVITY, HEALING,
AND TRANSFORMATION**

Foreword by Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche

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INTRODUCTION

The seeing commit a strange error. They believe
that we know the world only through our eyes.

—Jacques Lusseyran

I have engaged in deep inner work for most of my adult life, centered around fifty years of meditation. My journey has been a quest to discover who I am and to find answers to the big questions: Why are we here? What's the meaning of life? What happens after we die? Part of this journey has included the traditional Tibetan Buddhist three-year retreat, where I had the luxury of engaging in dozens of meditations in the most supportive environment. To enhance my understanding of the mind, over the past few years I have systematically explored some of the most potent psychedelics on the planet.¹ Eastern or Western, ancient or modern, natural or technological, if there is a legitimate method for psychological and spiritual development, I have probably tried it. As rewarding as many of these approaches have been, nothing compares to my experience with dark retreat. It is easily the most transformative practice I have ever done.

For nearly thirty years, this unusual practice has delivered life-changing insights. It has illuminated dimensions of being beyond my imagination. It has birthed creativity at breathtaking new heights. It has shown me, repeatedly, what really matters. It has healed fractures in my mind and heart I didn't even know existed, and it has connected me to others and to the planet at the most

profound levels. As I age and contemplate the ultimate dark retreat, it has become my main preparation for this final journey, one that has removed all fear of death. And the return on investment is profound. Just a few days in the dark pays dividends for months or even years.

Dark retreat is also the most challenging practice I have ever done. Nothing has asked more of me. Nothing has stretched me to such an extent. Nothing has commanded such levels of honesty. And absolutely nothing has demanded so much surrender. Every requirement and demand has been rewarded tenfold. It's almost like cheating. How can such brief durations in darkness deliver so many life-altering experiences (chapter 4)? Where do the transformations come from, and why do they last (chapter 5)? Why is dark retreat the most experiential and revelatory practice for so many people (chapter 6)?

But this practice is not for everybody. Dark retreat is big medicine. This book is just as much about keeping people *out* as it is about inviting them *in*. If you approach dark retreat as you would an ancient temple, you will be blessed. If you approach it as the next peak to conquer or the latest exotic experience to check off your list, you will be reproached. When darkness isn't engaged with the respect it deserves, it spans you. With the proper guidance and respect, this medicine can save you. In his book *Beauty: The Invincible Embrace*, John O'Donohue writes, "What you encounter, recognize, or discover depends to a large degree on the quality of your approach . . . When we approach with reverence, great things decide to approach us."²

Before we go any further, pause for a moment. Take a deep breath. Now, reflect on the deepest and most meaningful experience of your life. What do you do with your eyes? Where do you go? Almost everybody closes their eyes or lowers their head and goes within. In moments of silence or commemoration before a big public event—in moments of depth—virtually everyone turns inside. To reflect is to literally "bend it back." Dark retreat is possibly the most mind-bending thing you can do. Deep reflection, provided by the metaphysical mirror of darkness, turns the mind and heart back upon itself, allowing you to see what really matters. In Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*, a magical fox shares with the prince what he calls "my secret, a very simple secret," which is, "It

is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.” Close your eyes to open your heart. Then you will see.

Origin of This Book

I have written nine previous books. Each one was a labor of love, requiring endless research, writing, and rewriting. The book you hold in your hands came almost fully written to me at the end of a recent dark retreat. On one hand, it’s the easiest book I’ve ever penned, with pages flowing out of me as quickly as I could put words to paper.³ On the other hand, it’s turned out to be the most difficult book. The difficulty is fourfold. First, how do you illuminate darkness without destroying it with light? It’s not easy to speak of the unspeakable. As Zen writer Alan Watts said, the task “is to say what cannot be said, to eff the ineffable.” How do you shrink-wrap a practice of infinite depth into finite letters without eff-ing it up? At the deepest levels, dark retreat takes you all the way to nonduality because darkness is the color of nonduality.⁴ When you try to speak about nonduality using dualistic language, you’ll always eff it up. Irony, paradox, and contradiction abound. But irony, paradox, and contradiction are just the ways nonduality looks through a dualistic lens. Reality itself is not paradoxical; it’s just not effable.

Second, dark retreat is a topsy-turvy journey probably unlike anything you’ve ever done. It’s one reason the practice is drawing so much attention. It’s just so unconventional and bizarre. Everything is turned inside out and upside down in dark retreat. Your daytime compass is worthless in the dark. Every traditional navigation system is left behind. Standard notions of directionality, accomplishment, and success no longer apply. So how do I orient you in a journey where disorientation is core to the journey? How do I help you keep your bearings when getting lost is how you find what you’re truly looking for?

Third, darkness invites intimacy and exposure. Dark retreat strips you down to levels of nakedness you didn’t even know were possible. To share experiences that are so exposed, so personal, and so vulnerable renders violence to the experience itself and can keep the experience from maturing into realization.⁵ Why should I take

that risk? And fourth, although there are a few esoteric books on tantric-level dark retreat, there is nothing of note that I can find for the general reader.⁶ I, therefore, feel an obligation to represent this ancient practice as accurately as possible.

After my first formal dark retreat many years ago, I went to my teacher to share the experience and seek his counsel. This esteemed Rinpoche (an honorific term meaning “Precious One”) offered his advice and then cautioned me, “You can talk about many things, but keep this practice to yourself.”⁷ For many years, I have heeded his instruction. But this book burst into my mind with the clear message to write it. What to do? I believe it’s time to share for the following reasons.

It’s Out There

Dark retreat is rapidly emerging onto the self-improvement and spiritual scene. The toothpaste is out of the tube, and it’s not going back in. NFL superstar Aaron Rodgers went into a dark retreat a few years ago, and the press went ballistic about his strange adventure (which included an interview with former Fox News star Tucker Carlson). NBA icons Dwight Howard and Rudy Gobert, along with a host of other elite athletes, have posted social media clips about their experiences in dark retreat, inspiring a rush to see what the fuss is about. Movie stars, famous authors, artists, entrepreneurs, billionaires, and other celebrities have also gone into the dark and started to talk. Dark retreat centers are popping up around the world. My friends who run some of these centers tell me they’re booked years in advance, with a waiting list of hundreds. A host of scientists in Europe and America are now studying dark retreat and darkness therapy.⁸ The word is getting out, and it is fantastic. Or is it?

Dark retreat is remarkably similar to psychedelics in its promise and peril. Numerous studies proclaim the benefits of psychedelics, along with the proportional hazards. Without the proper set and setting, psychedelics can do more harm than good. Bad trips are not uncommon. *Set* refers to mindset, your motivation in taking the substance and your aspirations for the journey; *setting* refers to the holding environment, whether it’s caring professionals in a psychedelic-assisted therapy session or your drinking buddies wanting a new high. When psychedelics surged onto the scene sixty years ago, the excitement stampeded over safety, and the medicines were

banned. Decades of important research and beneficial use were lost due to impatience, misunderstanding, and lack of care.

Nearly every opportunity and obstacle in the world of psychedelics applies to dark retreat. With the proper set and setting, one good trip can electrify your life. Without the proper setup, one bad trip can electrocute.⁹ It's critical to understand that darkness itself never hurts anybody. It's completely harmless. How you relate to the dark and what it reflects create the (self-inflicted) damage. Darkness is a truth teller, a mirror. But dark retreat is a magnifying mirror that shows you who you truly are and exactly what you're made of at atomic levels. Darkness is exacting. The questions to reflect upon are: How willing are you to be so exposed? How up close and personal do you want to get to yourself? How big a dose of *yourself* can you handle? Truth heals. But how much truth can you take?

Despite the burgeoning hype with psychedelics and dark retreat, nothing is a panacea. I'm going to tout the outrageous benefits of this practice, but as with any method, don't put all your eggs in one basket. We so quickly project all our hopes onto new techniques, only to have them dashed as our projections fade and we fall out of love and back into reality. Don't turn to dark retreat to cure all your ails, and don't view it as the latest self-help method in the New Age supermarket or the trendiest form of Goth meditation. There's a reason the formal practice (versus informal home use) is historically guarded. It's not because dark retreat admits you into a secret club, but because such an exotic practice tends to magnetize spiritual thrill seekers, reckless psychonauts, and poorly motivated explorers, who then suffer the consequences of such a flippant attitude.

When my teacher told me not to speak about dark retreat decades ago, times were different. Perhaps he felt that people weren't ready. In 2002, only 7.5 percent of Americans meditated; in 2022, that number jumped to 18.3 percent.¹⁰ Today it is estimated that about 35 million people in America and anywhere from 200 to 500 million people worldwide meditate.¹¹ Some 55 million people in the US practice yoga, and around 20 million people in the US alone have tried psychedelics. Since the pandemic, meditation has spread dramatically. The Global Wellness Institute found that since March of 2020, time spent meditating increased by 2,900 percent worldwide.¹² Is it

possible that authentic meditators, yogis, and plant-medicine seekers are looking for the next step on their journey?

My aspiration in writing this book is to help you determine if this practice is right for you and if dark retreat could be your next step. With some honest checklists and a directory of indications and contraindications (chapter 11), you can evaluate if this practice has something to offer. If it does, this book provides everything you need to know to have a safe and fruitful journey. How do you prepare for dark retreat (chapter 9)? How do you integrate the insights (chapter 10)? What do you do when challenges arise (chapter 14)? How long should you stay in, when do you come out, and should you go back for more (chapters 8, 14, 10)? And what exactly do you do in there (chapter 7)? Starting with easy home practice, I will guide you step-by-step and show you how applicable this ancient practice is for our modern age.

A Return to Source

The world is deeply mired in what the Hindu tradition calls the Kali Yuga, the “age of vice and misery,” and what Japanese Buddhism refers to as mappo, the Degenerate Age.¹³ Fifty years ago, meditation master Trungpa Rinpoche wrote, “This is the darkest hour of the dark ages. Disease, famine, and warfare are raging like the fierce north wind.”¹⁴ Political upheaval, ecological devastation, social injustice, cultural divides, gender inequality, poverty, homelessness, and endless conflict are just a few of the many crises that comprise our present metacrisis. Many reasons are given for this metacrisis (also called the polycrisis, systemic crisis, or permacrisis), with an equal number of suggested solutions. A broad-spectrum approach is needed to address broad-spectrum problems.

I will argue that the multitudinous display of problems can be reduced to fundamental principles and addressed by a return to our origins.¹⁵ Dark retreat delivers us to the reduction base of innate wholeness and helps us understand what’s really going on, not merely within ourselves but within the world at large (chapter 2). It may seem initially facile and dismissive of the complexity of the metacrisis, but societies are comprised of individuals, and every individual shares the same fundamental principles of being. It’s not a tired cliché but a ceaseless proclamation of the truth:

Despite our superficial differences, at the ground of being, we're essentially the same. But in this light-polluted and highly distracted age, we lose our shared essence in the complex display of modernity. We forget.

The multiplicity effectively obscures the underlying unity. And multiplicity arises in broad daylight, when our most superficial and dualistic sense of sight splinters the world, dominates our perception, then seduces us out and away from ourselves. If left unchecked, outside light turns into a thermonuclear weapon of mass distraction. With the advent of artificial light, the damage is only getting worse. We've ironically lost our way with too much light. By taking us underground, dark retreat returns us to our common base, removes the divisive splinters, and initiates healing. It heals because it helps us remember.

Satellite data has revealed that artificial light is spreading and growing brighter, producing more light pollution and a "widespread loss of the night."¹⁶ Because of electric light, outdoor illumination has grown 3 to 6 percent annually in the second half of the twentieth century. "While this has benefited productivity and safety, it has come with a dark side. The night is no longer dark enough."¹⁷ We're suffering from a massive darkness deficit disorder. Franz Hölker, coauthor of a *Science Advances* study, warns, "From an evolutionary perspective, now, artificial light is a very new stressor. The problem is that light has been introduced in places, times, and intensities at which it does not naturally occur, and many organisms have had no chance to adapt to this new stressor."¹⁸ It has devastating implications for the environment, for human health, and most importantly for our psychological and spiritual (psychospiritual) evolution. Darkness deficit disorder leads to an introspective deficit disorder. It's a disorder because we think what we're looking for is outside in the light when it's actually to be found in the darkness within.

Because light in general and artificial light in particular tend to pull us away from ourselves, we've lost contact with who we really are. We're living on the surface of ourselves, then wondering why something is missing. We're equally out of touch with this sacred earth and can no longer truly feel each other. As earth is losing its darkness, we are losing our way. Darkness deficit disorder is a disorder of depth. So much of the psychospiritual path is associated

with light and height. We clamor for peak experiences and strive for the light. But if we're not careful, this can lead to high-altitude sickness and serious sunburn. I'm not dismissing the value of light nor the importance of lofty achievement, but merely pointing out the imbalance of the Kali Yuga and the need for darkness and depth. For every step we take up and out, we need to take another step down and in. Otherwise, we get dizzy and disoriented with the height and blinded by the light.

When I spend time in the dark, it is to recover the night and restore my sight. In dark retreat, with absolutely nothing to seduce me out, with no trace of light pollution, I'm drawn deeply within and see things never seen before. I find what I'm truly looking for and what really matters. These retreats reestablish the natural curfew of the night and cure the darkness deficit disorder. They keep me from getting into discursive trouble, the inevitable turmoil that accompanies an insatiably outward-bound mind. Barbara Brown Taylor, author of the bestselling book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, writes, "I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light."¹⁹ Perhaps there's a symbolic reason we have two eyes. Keep one eye on the dark, and you'll never lose sight of your depth.

Lunar Spirituality

In this Degenerate Age, humanity has been seduced away from the center of itself and as far away as possible from the divine. This divinity lies at the core of our being, which is pitch-black.²⁰ Poet Christopher Dewdney writes, "It is always night inside the body." Sunlight only penetrates a few millimeters past the skin, beyond that is absolute darkness. "The perpetual night of the body is where each of us began, so we are truly children of the physical night."²¹ In that deep silence and stillness, in the darkness at the center of ourselves, we will find the exalted. But silence and stillness, held under the cover of darkness, scare us. So we jump out of the bed of darkness and search outside for our version of the divine, misplacing ourselves in the light. In countless ways, we are solar-powered beings, light eaters, and ours is a solar spirituality.

Mine is a lunar spirituality. I worship the night and am consumed by it. “The night is our window on the Infinite,” writes naturalist Chet Raymo. I have spent my life exploring the infinity within, the origins of life, the beginning of consciousness, the basis of all. And this always leads me back to the dark. In Greek mythology and the Book of Genesis, darkness precedes light. In Hinduism, the darkness of dreamless sleep is called “causal consciousness,” which means that both dreaming and waking consciousness arise from it. The flash of the Big Bang arose from a womb of primordial darkness. Seeds germinate in the dark. I was probably conceived in the dark, spent nine months bathed in it, and was then born from it.

You and I are children of darkness. Literally and allegorically. Every morning we arise from darkness, and every night we return to it. Every flash of insight or flicker of thought arises from the background darkness of the mind and returns to it, like a campfire spark melting into the nighttime sky. One day our bodies will melt back into the dark. Whether we like it or not, darkness is our primal home. It behooves us to become familiar with it.

Origins of Dark Retreat

Even though dark retreat is making a splash as a new method of transformation, forms of this practice have been around for millennia. It’s difficult to say when the practice began, but one can easily imagine our ancient ancestors doing natural forms of dark retreat in the recesses of their caves. Practicing in sensory deprivation has been part of religious, shamanistic, and Indigenous cultures for ages. “Temple sleep” rituals were part of ancient Egypt, going back some 4600 years, where initiates spent time in darkness to seek spiritual guidance and commune with the divine.²² In ancient India, dating back to around 1500 BCE, yogic practitioners went into the dark to nurture evolved states of consciousness and deepen spiritual practice.

Ancient Greek and Roman mystics performed practices in caves and other sequestered settings to invoke religious experiences. The Greeks specifically engaged in incubation rites for healing or to receive prophetic dreams from the gods.²³ The ritual use of darkness to evoke altered states of consciousness in the Neoplatonic tradition is also well documented.²⁴ Dark retreats have long been part of

Taoism and are actively practiced with modern masters like Mantak Chia.²⁵ The Indigenous Kogi population of Colombia has engaged in dark practice for at least six hundred years. Children destined to become spiritual leaders, called Mamás, are sometimes placed in darkness (or near darkness) right after birth and can stay there for up to nine years as they nurture their relationship with the spirit world, Aluna. The ancient Japanese Shinto tradition works with the practice of komori (“child of the night”), their version of dark retreat.²⁶ Tibetan and Bön Buddhism, where most of my training comes from, have engaged in dark practice for over a thousand years.

Sūtra vs. Tantra Dark Retreat

Dark retreat comes in two forms, sūtra and tantra.²⁷ The Sanskrit word *sūtra* means “discourse, sermon, or scripture,” and refers to exoteric teachings delivered in a public setting. Sūtra-level dark retreat is for anyone. This is an accessible practice you can do at home or in formal retreat settings, and it is our main focus in this book.

Tantra-level dark retreat, explored in a future volume, is a different matter. This is prescription-strength medicine that must be prescribed by an authentic teacher, then used as directed by a genuine student. When my teacher admonished me not to speak about dark retreat, he was referring to this form of practice. *Tantra* means “weave, continuum” but is notoriously difficult to define, which is one reason it can be readily distorted into domains like “tantric sex” or “tantric speed dating” (no kidding). For our purposes, tantra refers to esoteric teachings delivered in a private setting for a select group of prepared individuals. The tantras themselves are intentionally opaque, or self-secret. Without a commentary, a knowledgeable guide, and previous experience in the sūtras, the tantras are impenetrable.²⁸ It’s like trying to understand advanced calculus without having studied basic math.

Tantra dark retreat transcends but includes sūtra dark practice. It involves retreats of up to forty-nine days, engages methods designed to elicit a particular set of experiences, and, according to Tibetan Buddhism, is the ultimate preparation for death. This does not mean that sūtra-level practice isn’t as transformative as its tantric counterpart. As we’ll see, sūtra-level practice has tremendous benefits—without the risks of tantra (chapter 5). To give you a sense

of how far dark retreat can go, I'm going to use the classification of tantra dark retreat to discuss the deeper aspects of this practice. These interjections are a form of "trickle-down spirituality," where a lofty teaching is briefly engaged to show you what is possible and elevate subordinate levels of material.

For purposes of contradistinction, sūtra dark retreat is more psychological in nature and deals with self-improvement, while tantra dark retreat is more spiritual in nature and deals with self-transcendence. While these distinctions are helpful, in the end it's all fuzzy. You can have full-blown tantric-level experiences in a sūtra retreat and, conversely, harvest mostly sūtra-level insights in a tantric retreat. Like everything in the dark, the boundaries break down and these levels blend into each other.²⁹ As we go further into this book, we'll drop deeper into tantric levels of dark retreat, mirroring the experience of dedicated dark trekkers. Many of these deeper insights came to me after a number of dark retreats. They are inserted to give you a sense of just how much is possible if you stick with this practice.

Dark retreat is not about darkness. It's about you. It's about depth. It's about getting to know yourself, without distraction, at the deepest possible levels. If you don't know who you are, how can you possibly know what you really want? Dark retreat reveals the extents you go to in order to avoid yourself and how that avoidance strategy causes all your suffering. Go into the dark to find yourself, to find what you truly want, and to end suffering. It's a marvelous practice of "lost and found." What is lost in the light can be found in the dark.

How to Read This Book

This book will progress, like your time in darkness itself, from relatively accessible introductory material to progressively deeper topics. If you don't want to go this deep, just skim or skip the deeper sections. As with darkness altogether, do what feels right for you. You may find that coming back to the deeper dives in a later reading makes more sense, especially if you have the chance to explore dark practice and get a feel for it. Keep in mind that dark retreat is not amenable to skimming. It's a disservice to the practice to keep things lite. Dropping into the depths should be done slowly. Just like in scuba diving, you don't want to go down too fast. Take

your time, get used to the gravity of the material and the density of these waters, and you'll enjoy the plunge. Otherwise, you're likely to dart back up to the surface, not unlike the desire to head for the door when things get heavy in the dark.

The first seven chapters create the view that supports dark retreat. For those who are anxious to get going, the nuts and bolts of dark practice are introduced in chapter 8. Copious endnotes accompany the text and can be read after completing the book or upon a second reading. My favorite books are the ones that give me pause or stop my mind altogether. Books where I need to take a breath and feel into what's being said. When I enter darkness, I have to slow down or come to a full stop to get my bearings. Take your steps in this journey mindfully, respectfully, even reverentially, and darkness will gradually reveal its secrets.

Getting Started

And now go, and make interesting mistakes, make
amazing mistakes, make glorious and fantastic
mistakes. Break rules. Leave the world more
interesting for your being here. Make. Good. Art.

—Neil Gaiman

In a dark time, the eye begins to see, I meet
my shadow in the deepening shade.

—Theodore Roethke

It doesn't take much to get started. At the simplest and most accessible level, you have eyelids. Just close them. But you can only do that for so long before falling asleep. In this chapter, I'll offer some suggestions for beginning a home practice, then show you how to transition into formal retreat. "Where there's a will, there's a way" applies to engaging darkness at home. Be creative. Think outside the box, which is in resonance with the "outside the box" nature of dark retreat altogether. Don't wait till everything is perfect before you start exploring darkness. If you have a connection to this practice,

just do it. But there's also no need to reinvent the wheel, so a few guidelines may help.

While it is beneficial to do retreats at dark retreat centers, there is great value in establishing even brief periods of practice at home. You do not need to go to a dark retreat center to harvest the fruits of this practice. The continuity of daily practice adds up. Not only does home practice stand alone, but it prepares you for formal retreats and helps you integrate your experience after retreat. Those who only do retreats at centers may be relying too much on that approach and shortchanging themselves by not practicing at home. A freestyle approach with a pioneering attitude, mixed with childlike curiosity and humility, is a great way to get started. Establish your own relationship with darkness. Go in, do your own thing, and find your own way. It's like dating. Everybody learns how to do it by just doing it. This playful approach doesn't make dark practice less meaningful or impactful. It makes it more enjoyable. Remember that dark retreat is all about exploring yourself. You're dating yourself. Darkness just provides the most intimate space for getting to know yourself.

Anxiety and anticipation are part of the game. You're courting the unknown. People are always afraid of what they don't know, so take the time to get to know darkness on your terms. Introduce yourself, become familiar with it, and make friends with it. Which means becoming familiar with your deeper self and making friends with yourself. If you just listen, darkness will tell you how to proceed. I, therefore, recommend that you start by doing nothing in the dark. Couldn't be easier. That's ironically what makes it hard. Just open and surrender. Let darkness teach you. One participant said after her retreat: "The dark is like this wise elder. If you ride its wave and listen, you will get everything." *You* are that wise elder. Darkness allows the wisdom within to come out and give you everything you need.

At a certain point, darkness may suggest more formality. A more structured practice might involve things like darkness therapy, yoga nidrā, or liminal dreaming. At intermediate levels, you can engage darkness for lucid dreaming and dream yoga. Those on the spiritual path can bring any of their daily practices into the dark and see how darkness might enhance those practices. And at higher levels, you can step into tantric-level practices like sleep yoga or bardo

yoga. The (dark) sky is the limit. You could devote an entire retreat to each of these practices or explore any number of them within a single retreat. It's beyond our scope to unpack the details of all these options, but a number of resources and capable guides can point the way.¹ From doing absolutely nothing to working with all the practices outlined here or in chapter 4, darkness offers an endless spectrum of possibilities to explore.

Duration

The second facet is how long you do it. This is one of the slipperiest aspects of dark retreat, and where this practice shares similar challenges with psychedelics. Recall that *psychedelic* means “mind manifesting.” You're turned inside out in the dark. What was inner and hidden in the light of day emerges to become outer and manifest in the dark. How much mind manifestation can you handle? How much of your innards can you tolerate? How big of a dose of yourself can you deal with? You can underdose and overdose with dark medicine just as you can with plant medicine. While rare, I know people who went in for three days on their first “trip,” and it clearly wasn't enough. They didn't get much out of it. I know others who went in for the same duration and clearly overdosed. They ingested too much of themselves and got more than they bargained for. Getting the dosage right may require some experimentation. The maxim “not too tight, not too loose” in the form of “not too long, not too short” is a helpful guide. You do want to find your edge, but you don't want to fall over it. If it's too short and, therefore, too easy, you could water your retreat down to the point that you lose the potency and sacredness. Have you ever encountered a rite of passage that was easy?

Start small. Explore darkness in bite-sized chunks. Dark retreat is slow food, which helps with digesting and incorporating your experiences. It's about quality, not quantity. This maxim cannot be overstated. When people hear that I do dark retreat, the first question is usually, “How long do you do it?” I rarely respond to the question because it sets a bar. Bars set metrics, metrics imply measurement, and dark retreat is about the transcendence of measurement. This practice deals with erasing reference points, not creating them. The question “How long do you do it?” is revelatory of how we consciously or unconsciously measure ourselves

and each other. The longer the better, the bigger the better, the more the better, the faster the better—none of which applies in the dark. In darkness, less is more. While I understand the question could be motivated by genuine curiosity, it's much more important to emphasize the quality of the experience than the duration. In a related vein, don't compare your experiences in the dark to experiences shared in this book. This book is not a yardstick by which you should measure yourself.

When I introduce dark retreat in a seminar, I play with the Tibetan forty-nine-day model. Let's do our first dark retreat together to show you how this works. Take a nice deep breath, then close your eyes for 4.9 seconds. That's it! You've just done your first dark retreat. Now, close your eyes for 49 seconds. A slightly bigger bite, but easily swallowed. Next, close your eyes and remain silent and still for 4.9 minutes. Somewhere in this time range is when you want to get an eye mask, like the Manta™ or Mindfold™ mask, which allows you to keep your eyes open underneath the mask. This is also when you can start exploring what it's like to step into a dark closet or any other enclosed space at home.

As wonderful as it is to practice with my mask on, it feels different when my entire body is immersed in darkness. Light does penetrate the skin. That's why I created my tiny dark room in the basement. I don't get the "full monty" effect without taking the full-body plunge. The ability of light to penetrate your body depends on the wavelength. Shortwave ultraviolet light penetrates 0.5 to 2.5 mm; green to orange light penetrates 1 to 3 mm; red to near infrared penetrates the most: 1 to 3 cm (10 to 30 mm).² Even though these distances are small, they're not nothing, and the effects of light on your body and mind can be felt.

When it feels right, take the next step and do it for 49 minutes. If this is too much, back off. Forty-nine minutes is just a playful guide. It can be whatever duration works for you. I've gone trekking in the Himalayas many times, climbing above Everest base camp to altitudes nearing 20,000 feet. To prevent high-altitude sickness, you have to spend a night or two at lower elevations to acclimatize before working your way up. If you go up too fast, the altitude becomes a serious problem and can kill you. If you feel a headache, the rule is to descend to an altitude you were at prior to the onset

of the headache. In this slow and steady way, climbers can reach the summit of Everest at over 29,000 feet. Dark retreat is a high-altitude practice that warrants the same respect. But once again, don't concern yourself with summiting anything, conquering anything, or achieving anything more than spending quality time with yourself.

If 49 minutes (or thereabout) is workable for you, spend some time at that "altitude" before going higher. An exponential approach means that the next steps get rapidly bigger, so this is when you release the model. For some people, 4.9 hours may be doable, but moving to 4.9 days and beyond is usually too steep for most folks. Relax into durations that are not only workable but enjoyable. Then spend time there to build familiarity so this becomes your new "base camp." With time, you can expand your temporal base and slowly but surely climb to new heights—or in this case, new depths.

One reason dark retreat is considered advanced is that you become your own trekking guide, your own meditation instructor. Dark retreat is about getting to know yourself at entirely new levels and increasingly higher altitudes. No one knows your idiosyncrasies, your faculties and foibles, better than you. Trust your intuition. Listen to your body. Heed your heart. While incremental stretching beyond your comfort zone is good, *never push*. Pushing too hard can throw you past your growth zone and into the danger zone. The only time people get into trouble is when they set goals that are too high, then force themselves to reach those peaks.

What to Expect

By this point, I hope you realize that you should temper your expectations. Expect the unexpected. Most of the benefits arise when you drop everything, including all expectations. Open. Relax. And let the darkness do its thing, free of any hope or fear about what might happen. For some people, all hell breaks loose. For others, all heaven breaks loose. Just go with whatever is breaking and relate to it with equanimity. Openness is what allows for emergence, and it is the best way to relate to what emerges. Going with the flow is the best way to go. Emergence only turns into an emergency when you don't relate to the flow of your experience properly, especially when you try to dam things up. This is why control freaks have a harder time in

the dark, because so much of what happens is outside their control. Even spiritual types, who think they can manage everything with their arsenal of meditations, can have issues. This is when they need to recall the slogan “Self-liberate even the antidote,” which means *drop everything*. Go into the dark naked and let yourself be clothed by darkness itself.

Being so unconventional, dark retreat does not abide by conventional linear and, therefore, predictable principles. What happens in there is literally incalculable. You’re stepping into the wilderness of your own mind, taking a walk on the wild side. It’s as nonlinear as your physical meanderings around the dark room. As any meditator knows, you will inevitably run into the same old stories, the same narratives, spinning around you as you run into yourself in the dark. It’s just a concentrated version of what happens in life as repetitive patterns express themselves undiluted in the dark. It can appear like nothing is happening, but careful observation of this endless circumambulation reveals otherwise.

Patrick Harpur writes: “However much we wish the soul’s path to be straight, upward, and ascending, it is more likely to be meandering, full of regressions, downward turns, and backward glances. The endless, wearisome circulations . . . give us hope that the endless obsessive patterns and neuroses we are so often trapped in may be resolved by the simple act of repetition itself.”³ Every time something comes around and you simply witness it, you’re exhausting the habit, or karma, that spins this not-so-merry-go-round. Eventually, you discover that “soul needs no goal, center, or rest for it is always at home on the winding road.”⁴ In other words, the journey itself is the goal. That’s pretty unconventional.

Location

While a steady home practice is a complete path unto its own, and arguably the most important form of dark retreat, for many people, the next step is deciding where to go for formal retreats. I’ve done a day or two of retreat at home and know a few advanced practitioners who have done forty-nine days of in-house retreat. If multiple days of home retreat works for you, that’s great. But a big part of dark retreat is complete sensory deprivation and withdrawing from as many habits as possible. Try as I might, I cannot achieve these levels

of isolation at home. The noise of planes flying overhead, barking dogs, or emergency sirens all reach my dark room. The sounds and smells of normal household life also reach me, seducing my mind into all manner of habitual commentary. I find that dark retreats in specially prepared cabins or caves are a big step forward.

As of this writing, there aren't many options for formal dark retreats in the United States, but this will change as the word gets out. There's a center in Oregon, another in Vermont, two centers in Colorado, and one in upstate New York. Retreat centers in Norway, Germany, and the Czech Republic tend to emphasize darkness therapy. Bali has a center. Australia has a few centers, there's one in South Africa, and there are several in Costa Rica.

Dark retreat once again abides by the principles of "set and setting," which means a good physical location is important. A proper setting allows you to relax and surrender to that *holding* environment. Darkness is an incubator, and incubators require high maintenance.

Here are a few questions to consider when looking for a retreat setting. How dark is the cabin or cave? Light leaks are a common issue in ill-prepared rooms. Don't be shy to ask pointed questions about the center and the caretakers before you arrive. Can you look at reviews? Are there people you can talk to who have done a retreat there? Is it quiet? Is it 100 percent safe? I've talked to people who have gone to retreat centers where external sounds and smells were an issue. Is there good ventilation? The first time I did a dark retreat, there was very little air flow in the cabin. The lack of ventilation, on top of the weight of the darkness, felt suffocating at times. Can you control the temperature, and how long does it take for the temperature to change? Is there a fan in the space? What kind of food is delivered, by whom, and how often? For retreats of a week or more, a refrigerator and microwave are helpful. These are not needed if you arrange to have all your food delivered. In my first retreat, I had lunch and dinner delivered. I wanted human contact, even if it was just a brief "How are you?" In my second retreat, I cut back and had one meal a day delivered in the evening, with Tupperware containing breakfast and lunch for the next day. Food issues (which often tip into food neurosis) are something you can explore on retreat and work to release.

Anything Else?

In addition to food delivery, what other support do you have? Is there someone you can talk to, or are you totally on your own? Does the center have any preparation protocols and follow-up integration? Is there someone you can reach in an emergency or if something happens to the room? In one of my retreats, an external light-blocking panel came loose from big winds and banged for hours till my food was delivered and I could get help. How quickly can someone respond? What kind of plumbing do they have, and what happens if the toilet plugs up? Who can help you, and how quickly, if a flying insect gets into your space when food is delivered or if a rodent enters the ventilation duct? Is the mattress okay? Do the sheets smell mildewy (a problem I had in one retreat)? I now bring my own pillow and a light comforter when possible.

Some of these issues are grist for the meditative mill and give you the opportunity to work with irritation and impatience. Some can be quite humorous. But other issues aren't so funny. You don't have to be neurotic about getting everything perfect. A rugged pioneering spirit does help. But you also don't have to endure situations that could detract from your experience. Many centers have yoga mats and meditation cushions in the dark room; a few places offer stationary bikes or other aerobic equipment; and several places have a bathtub instead of a shower, which I always prefer.

In terms of what to bring, keep it as simple as possible. You can always find ways to distract yourself with various accoutrements, so do a gut check and bring the absolute minimum. In addition to loose-fitting clothes, I bring a voice recorder, a backup journal, my eye mask, and elastic workout bands. That's it. I've found that sticky notes work well for jotting down insights. A bullet point or two is enough to jog my memory when the lights come back on, and writing legible notes is easy on a sticky pad. Some level of exercise every day is important to me, so in addition to yoga and basic calisthenics, thirty minutes a day of resistance exercise with the bands is mandatory. Exercise keeps me embodied. I know people who bring their favorite tea, stuffed animal, bedding, and snacks. There's nothing inherently problematic with comfort food and other comfort-zone items, but check your motivation before you pack anything, and remember that dark retreat is a form of fasting. You're in there to

detox from as many habits as possible. Bring what you need, but ask yourself, “Do I *really* need to have that?” It may seem a bit extreme, but play with this query: What can I take with me when I die? My mind and my heart. So just take that.

Gray Retreat

The more I guide beginners into dark medicine, the more I recommend starting formal retreat practice with a gray, or mixed, retreat. Instead of a total lockdown into darkness, which can be intimidating, a gray retreat is about weaving in and out of the darkness at your own pace. This is not a lesser form of retreat but a more relaxed way of exploring darkness. A gray retreat allows you to titrate the darkness, consuming as much as you’re able to digest. Get acquainted with darkness on your terms. Try it on for size and see how it fits. How does thirty minutes fit your style? An hour? An afternoon? A full day? Gray retreats are also a great way to explore your relationship to all three zones, especially the stretch from your growth zone into the risk zone.

While dark retreat can appear extreme to outsiders, a practice for fanatics, always remember that it’s not about being hard on yourself but about being soft on yourself. In a gray retreat you go into the dark, stay in as long as it feels right, then come out or flip on the lights if it gets too uncomfortable. What “too uncomfortable” means will be explored in chapter 14. Dark medicine is truth serum. It’s about being true to yourself, honest with your experiences, and above all, gentle with yourself. One retreatant said, “Just being in that much space, to just be everything I am, without anything receding from me or coming for me. Just being there. Maybe it taught me how to be a friend unto myself. Which I then did.”

If you start to feel uncomfortable in the dark, I recommend that you feel into the discomfort for a bit. It’s like breathing into an intense yoga pose. You’re assuming new physical, mental, and spiritual asanas in the dark, and like any new pose, it can take some time to work your way into it. Instead of impulsively alleviating the discomfort and distracting back to your comfort zone, stay with the discomfort. Feel the stretch, but don’t feed it with your commentary or judgment. Be curious. Explore the unease in the ways outlined in this book, which will help you establish a new relationship to it.

How long you do this is up to you. It could take a few minutes or even longer. If the unease persists or worsens, do what you need to do to relieve it. In my first retreat, I would sometimes step outside at night with my mask on just to feel the cool air and hear distant sounds. Sometimes, just a few minutes of a break will do it; other times, a few hours or even longer. The notion of “fresh start” is important for any form of inner work. Trust yourself, and *never ever push*. “When in doubt, leave it out” is a healthy adage for beginners.

One retreatant openly shared her experience in trying to do three solid days in the dark: “At first, it was really disappointing. Thinking you have done all this work on yourself, healed a lot of things, and to be confronted with how much more there still was [to work on]. I let softness be there, I let vulnerability be there, I let myself be afraid. Then I let myself turn on the light when I needed it. It’s okay to turn on the light. It’s okay. Sometimes you need to.” It’s more than okay! It’s a sign of intelligence and an expression of loving-kindness toward yourself.

What Do You Do?

You can engage darkness in many ways, as we have seen. The following are suggestions to get things started at home, tips that also apply for going into formal retreat. If you’ve never worked with dark practice, I recommend that for the first few weeks of home practice, you don’t set any agenda. Go dark and see what happens. One retreatant shared: “I don’t know if there are words. It’s so wonderful to just *be*. I have such gratitude for giving myself the opportunity to face all of it, all of me, every bit. Every bit I’ve judged, every bit I’ve loved, and just be with it. All those things that mattered so much before I got into the dark became so small.” If there’s a mantra for this practice, it would be “open . . . relax.” You can let this mantra perfume your time in the dark, or if it feels right, go ahead and repeat it overtly when you’re in retreat. It’s similar to the instructions for how to approach a psychedelic session: “trust and surrender.” If you can do that, darkness will take care of the rest. (We’ll elaborate on this theme in chapter 9, in the sections on mindfulness and metta.)

You can see the irony of providing more instruction. But without some guidance, the instruction to “do nothing,” “just open,” or “simply be” might be too open, and spaciousness flips into spaciness.

You can see how subtle this gets because even self-observation, or the cultivation of witness awareness, implies that you're witnessing and observing, which is doing something. Trust your experience. Another practitioner shared: "I spend so much time in my life making things happen. And needing to do things, to be perceived as successful, as lovable, as worthy. Not anymore, that's for sure."

Another guideline, always worth reiterating, is to stay embodied. It's easy to get lost in headspace, to spin out in rumination, or to fall into think-holes in the dark. If you find yourself getting sucked into the draft of mental content, smile at that, let it go, and drop back into your body. Trauma therapist Bessel van der Kolk writes, "Only by getting in touch with your body, by connecting viscerally with your self, can you regain a sense of who you are, your priorities and values."⁵ A beginner's mind is a childlike mind, playful and inquisitive. And children are very embodied. One thing I often do in my retreats is take an ice-cold shower. I enjoy cold plunges in general, the rush of the dopamine release (some studies noted up to a 250 percent increase), and because I'm so deeply in touch with my body in the dark, a cold shower gets super cold. I playfully challenge you to keep an emotional upheaval alive when you're taking a cold plunge. The intense sensory impact hurls you into your body and out of your ruminating head.

If these open-ended approaches are not what you're after, that's totally fine. Use darkness anyway you like. Set the aspiration or intention for what you'd like to get out of the dark, work with the ancient principles of incubation, and see what happens.

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