

Manjushri Retreat

It was my third day back for my university's summer holidays when His Eminence Tsem Tulku Rinpoche asked my siblings and myself, "So, how would you and your



Manjushri retreat altar set-up

cousins like to go on a Manjushri retreat?" I thought I was hearing things, and it took a second for the question to sink in – a retreat?! Wow! Up till now, the only people we had heard of doing retreats were the grown-ups!

We use the word 'retreat' quite a lot but what does it really mean? Most of us would define it as moving away or moving back

from something, possibly even running away from a situation but it's not all negative – the word 'retreat' could also mean a haven, a sanctuary, a *refuge*. In the 'Buddhist' sense of the word, being in a retreat means to retreat from everyday activities and to devote some of our time purely to prayer and meditation. After all, most of our lives are spent towards satisfying our self-grasping mind – the purpose of a retreat, apart from creating the conditions and causes for us to benefit others and ourselves, is to recharge our spiritual batteries and to regain the balance we have lost from focusing on our selves day in and day out.



Manjushri retreat participants – left to right – Shirlene, Clifford, Christine, Jean Mei, Jean Ai (behind camera)

So H.E. outlined what we were going to do, a Manjushri retreat where we would recite 100,000 of Manjushri's beautiful mantra for ourselves and for our parents. He said that because we were our parents' children, heartfelt prayers from us would be the most

effective as we had the closest connection to them. That night, we went to H.E.'s *ladrang* and He gave us our first retreat instructions, ranging from how we would arrange our



Jean Mei lighting the candles for the Protector retreat

offerings to the prayers we would need. My mind reeled as H.E. gave us a quick once-over of the retreat 'rules' – for example, we were to maintain a vegetarian diet for the duration of the retreat, and during breaks in recitation, we should try not to talk. Handphones and laptops had to be turned off during the prayer sessions.

It sounds quite hardcore, doesn't it? The first things that flashed into my self-grasping mind were, "*Omg! No Internet and no handphone for hours?! No meat for **DAYS**?!! How am I going to survive?!!!!*"

Easily.

After the retreat book was compiled and my cousins had joined us from Penang, we began. There was definitely a 'chanting curve' as the retreat progressed – at the beginning, never mind reciting and meditating for as long as our monkey minds would allow, it was difficult enough to ignore how numb our bums felt from prolonged periods of sitting down!

Oh how my tummy ached from missing the taste of meat! How my fingers twitched at the prospect of being able to e-mail my boyfriend at the end of the day! Towards the end however, there was a little sense of triumph as we realised that the retreat 'rules' weren't all

that tough after all – my mind stopped wandering off towards the direction of the fridge, the direction of the computer, the direction of anywhere but where I actually was! The significance of this was lost on me until a few weeks later, when H.E. explained that vows



Protector retreat altar

and 'rules' aren't designed to restrict or refrain us, or to make our lives difficult – in fact, they are meant to return us to our original, *true* state, the happy and compassionate mind.



Protector retreat participants, Jean Mei, Christine and Jean Ai (behind camera)

Two weeks after our Manjushri retreat ended, I began a Protector retreat with my sister and my cousin at our dharma centre Kechara House. With the help of my aunty, we set up an elaborate altar full of beautiful offerings and thus we began – for a week, we spent 11 hours in the Protector chapel purifying our

karma and making offerings to one deity. In that room lit by red

lights, one could feel a powerful energy reverberating through the room, the prayers were *that* powerful.

It wasn't just the energy that told me the retreat we were doing was powerful though, it was also the difficulty which we faced in actually *doing* it. Although the Manjushri and Protector retreats were of

similar lengths in terms of the amount of mantras chanted and preceding prayers to be recited beforehand, for some reason the Protector retreat felt **so** much hard to accomplish and complete than the Manjushri retreat – the day felt longer, the prayers harder to recite, our minds spinning as



A closer look at the Protector retreat altar set-up

we recited the prayers...or maybe

it was just the red light in the chapel having an effect on us! In any case, I 'complained' to my mother about how difficult it was to do the retreat and she advised me saying that when we felt like it was a huge hurdle we were trying to cross just to finish the retreat, we should realise that we were dealing with something so beneficial and powerful that

obstacles, whether physical or those manifested from your mind, would arise one after another trying to discourage us from completing the retreat.

So we stuck it out, wanting **so** badly to say “*Ha! That’ll show you!*” to the obstacles that surfaced, and the effect at the end of the retreat told us everything we had been through and every emotion we had had to battle had been worth it – every night as I left the Protector chapel, despite any complaining I may have done about the perceived length and difficulty of the prayers, I felt a sense of accomplishment and a deep sense of gratitude that I had been allowed the opportunity to recite the sacred prayers. It really is difficult for me to articulate just how sacred those prayers were – the more we recited them, the more I noticed the ‘oomph’ the prayers held...they really packed a punch!

If H.E. were to ask me today whether or not I wanted to do another retreat, I would say ‘yes’ without the slightest hint of hesitation. The experience of being in a retreat is unparalleled – my mind was at ease, and I felt a sense of quiet descend upon me. For a few hours each day, I was given a break from my mind’s distractions – in fact, it almost felt like I was being *allowed* to think about others. I left the retreats very happy because not only had it brought siblings and cousins closer together, but I knew it had turned the huge cogwheels of karma, setting it in motion to benefit those closest to us.