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RV Dharma Bums

We both started by cutting off tooth brush handles so the pack wouldn't weigh as much when we were back packing in our 20's. Now, I'm writing from a heated yet compact RV while the rain threatens to turn to snow at Glacier National Park.

I wish to share this journey of decadence and joy in hopes that we convert some to becoming RV dharma bums, a sangha of those who in the end, hear Muir, Emerson and Thoreau as well as Pema, the Dalai Lama and Dogen.

After 40 some years of zafu schlepping and sitting, I became uncomfortable practicing meditation inside an enclosed room. I didn't go 'claustrophobic' or anything, I just felt that always practicing inside was a bit like dancing in a closet. The shrine was inspiring and I love the offerings and all, but church to me was always nature. And I got older. If you put in a blender: dharma practice, love of nature, becoming more bourgeois and a little travel excitement, whirrrrr, whala, you have an RV Dharma Retreat.

If 'All dharmas agree at one point' and the experience of that is love or awareness, what better place to see that revealed than in nature. Nature is my favorite place to see basic goodness, light and space all dressed up. I'm a more relaxed practitioner now and I rely on the visual aid, the shocking invitation and power of nature, to be present in my heart and open to the immediacy of the senses. A dharma bum gets to be in some of the greatest works of art nature has created.

We've been doing these retreats now for 4 years, having graduated to 6 months in RV retreat and 6 months in our home in Hawaii. It takes a number of blessed causes and conditions to be able to retreat for 6 months. The usual way folks seem to pull this off is to downsize the house and live part to full time on the road. We worked hard, got lucky with a house purchase and other blessings came our way, one being the rental market for our house in our small Hawaiian town.

Here's some hints to how we make 160 square feet work as a retreat rather than sheer claustrophobia and crazy making. After establishing a shrine and some boundary protection, the biggest hint is scheduled silence. Once we're settled into the campsite, we don't speak to each other in the mornings, not even a good morning, until 1PM. I can't say how essential this is. Mornings are solitary retreat time. It's the luxury of being alone. We both have rituals that we follow fairly strictly. My wife likes to stretch, do yoga and Tai Chi first thing, I like a cup of tea and a dharma book. Sometimes, she practices under the awning of the camp sight we're in whereas I like to find a hidden spot somewhere in the campground which has a sky view to do my practice.

Carve a plaque with the lojong slogans 'Drive all blames into oneself' and 'Be grateful to everyone' and place it in the most conspicuous place. Tonglen, humor and kindness get to be practiced moment to moment in a RV retreat. Failures in this area are frequent so this is another reason the silence and space of nature and practice are essential. The other help is that we're outside the vast majority of the time. We sleep and cook in the RV but other than really inclement days, we're outside.

Not unlike a dathun, plan on it taking 4 weeks before you feel like you can be wherever you are, that there's actually no rush to fit anything in. You can truly relax and feel joy. It's amazing how whacked our sympathetic nervous systems are. We generally stay in a campsite for a minimum of a week. That gives you a couple of days to know your new surroundings and at least 3-4 days to settle into deeper practice.

After a morning of silence and practice, we reconnoiter around oneish and plan some

adventure for the day, generally, a hike. After the day's adventure, there may be a glass of wine around a fire, some contested gin rummy card game, dinner and some reading or perhaps a video on the computer. If we're in a National Park, there's informative and entertaining night lectures which can be great as well.

A critical factor for us in RV life was that we have dogs as family members and they can come along on the retreat. Frequently, there's leash regulations and strict pick up the poop protocols, but to have them with us makes the pot right. They create another discipline of seeing them happily exercised and relieved appropriately.

There's a kind of hierarchy of campgrounds from the 'line em up commercial parks' to County park grounds, National Parks, State Parks and National Forest, our favs. What sorts out the more retreat like campgrounds is the ability to be off grid, known as dry camping. It's dry because there's no water or electrical hook ups and no sewer dump site. You're self contained. You're down to battery power and the water that's in your storage tanks. It's a good ecological discipline, like living on a boat. We can stay off grid, with the help of solar battery charger and conscious water consumption for about a week. In all honesty, this generally puts you with tent campers and not other RV people.

The size of your rig really is important. For us the smaller the better but then again we're talking living in it for 6 months in all kinds of weather. What do you need in terms of basic amenities? Getting graphic, it's great to have a pot to pee in, a comfortable bed, a warm (albeit military) shower, heat and a place to cook inside. That all can be done in about 22 feet but ours is 25 feet, really only 7 feet longer than a full sized truck.

Secret teachings on this is that 25 feet is the maximum size you can go and fit into our favorite campgrounds: National Forests. Many campgrounds were developed in the 60's and trailers and tents were small, so the pad size of the parking was a little bigger than cars of those era, around 25 feet. You really start to be limited where you can camp if your RV rig is bigger than 25 feet.

We are self confessed 'sight snobs' keeping records of the most private and secluded sights in the campground. This really matters as to your privacy and retreat like environment. In any campground there are one to a few great sites where, with proper positioning of the rig, you can be secluded and somewhat isolated. Also, there's days best to land, namely Sunday afternoons and Monday mornings, to get the best sight. There's now a whole online reservation system for many campgrounds and if you are serious about as much isolation as possible, it's important to get to know this reality. I got up at 4 AM Hawaii time, nine months exactly to the minute, before sites in Yosemite opened. At least in July and August you have to plan if you want the better sights and more popular locations.

Travel days are interesting, as transitions can be. We have a saying everybody's driving, which means both of us attend to the heightened demands of negotiating the complexity of traveling and moving. One gets pretty slow and a bit spacy, relaxed in retreat. It's all hands on deck to help each other with departure and safe transition protocols. We've made departures check lists. Frequently, there's some heartache, as you say good by to some drala relationship, a river, a tree, a mountain or a lake.

The U.S. of A lead the way for preserving space as National Parks We've set aside total power spots or drala hang outs for the nation to enjoy. It's commendable how much beauty and real estate we've set aside for the public to come to their senses. Generally, the primary focus of the locations of campgrounds are sacred mountains, lakes, rivers or forests. We're in Banff right now and Canada has also preserved vast areas for public sharing.

Another fantastic aspect of National Parks, both US and Canada is that they're like mini United Nations. We've been on hikes in the parks where we heard Russian, Danish, Swedish,

Japanese, Hungarian but little English. The National Parks restaurants also provide a kind of student international work exchange, and you get waited on by young people from all over the world, a delightful encounter.

We usually have some sketchy idea or area of the country we're going to explore, this year being the Canadian Rockies and Lake Louise where I did 1979 Seminary with Trungpa Rinpoche. Once we sketch out a general area, I look up dharma teachers that we follow and revere, for their teaching schedules. If there's a close geographical fit, then we alter plans a bit to be in the vicinity of those seminars or weekends. One can get these dharma teaching hits as a special treat of the retreat.

I need to paint some other realities, there's sometimes loud, decompressing campers, exuberant children, lots of bugs and storms. Once we situated next to a Family enterprise who stayed in campgrounds around the country while they delivered area telephone books during the day. Their nightly downtime was lite by a huge portable florescence light and very load robust musical choices. Fortunately, virtually all campgrounds have a strict noise curfew of 10 PM. We got to know this family a little and ended with great respect for how hard they worked to move their Family karma ahead.

Your whole wardrobe for six months, covering 3 seasons, is a twelve inch hanging bar and three 8 inch drawers. We have 'camping uniforms' that must be approved by the mate as they see them day in and day out. Life is simpler and more relaxed without a doubt. Say, 70 % of the time you don't have cell phone coverage or internet, that is a huge factor in retreating. I get a newspaper while provisioning about once a month. Mark Twain was right, the headlines and stories really don't change much. I recycle it for starting fires. Actually I've become more enamored with National Enquirer, at the check out line as I do keep up with my favorite stars shenanigans. Now friends, after seeing our pictures, are joining en-route for a few days. They jump into the silence, practice and being washed down by the heart opening beauty.

From Milarepa's standards, it is ridiculously luxurious. We have not eaten nettle soup yet, and it is rare on weekends and mid summer to not have some other camper's noise. I relax into acknowledging them as 'my people'. I see them as sangha on a mutual retreat. There's the picture and the invite. If nature is your church this might be a fit for you.

Aloha, Dr. Dean