



# Srivasthi Abbey

A Buddhist Monastery



## Retreat from Afar 2024: Refuge Ngöndro & the Four Truths

*Participant Manual*

*Last updated 11-30-23*

## Retreat from Afar

Every year during the winter, Sravasti Abbey residents enter a three-month silent retreat. Some people join us in person for the first month of retreat. For most people, however, that's not possible. So, we invite our friends to participate from afar for one, two, or all three months of retreat.

What does this mean? While the Abbey community meditates 4-5 sessions a day on a particular practice, you can do "Retreat from Afar" by committing to meditate for one or more sessions a day on the same practice. Many people find that one session a day for 1-3 months is totally doable within their existing routine of working, family life, and other activities.

This year, the topic of the Winter Retreat is the **refuge ngöndro and the four truths**. To participate in the Retreat from Afar, we ask you to commit to doing the refuge ngöndro meditation outline, paired with lamrim meditation on the four truths. You can find the meditation outline [here](#).

This would be for the one, two, or three months you decide to do retreat. You can shorten or lengthen the duration of your retreat at any time.

## Refuge Ngöndro & the Four Truths

Our ultimate goal is to become the Three Jewels ourselves. To do this, we need to rely on the guidance of the Three Jewels that already exist. To actualize the Dharma Jewel—which as true cessation and true path is the ultimate refuge—in our own mindstream, we take refuge in the Buddha as the one who taught the Dharma and in the Saṅgha as the ones who have actualized some true cessations and true paths in their mindstream. **Taking refuge is not simply reciting “I take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha” with our mouths. It involves an internal commitment to our spiritual practice that motivates us to humbly seek spiritual guidance.** Refuge is to be lived each moment, so that all the practices we do are directed toward actualizing the Dharma Jewel in our mindstream. When we have done this, we will have genuine, lasting joy and fulfillment, and our lives will have become highly meaningful. To attain nirvāṇa, we must start practicing now.

The Dalai Lama and Venerable Thubten Chodron,  
*[Following in the Buddha's Footsteps](#)*, pp.3-4.

“Ngöndro” means “preliminary.” There are various “preliminary practices” done in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, to help us accumulate merit and purify our minds so that they are better prepared to gain realizations. Refuge ngöndro is one of these preliminary practices, where we recite refuge formula—*Namo Gurubhya. Namō Buddhaya, Namō Dharmaya, Namō Saṅghaya*—111,111 times.

It's important to know that ngöndro is not about the numbers. Rather, the numbers just give us a goal to work towards, a commitment to keep up our daily practice, while we deeply consider what refuge means to us. As Venerable Chodron has [said](#), “Doing 100,000 is actually the opportunity to do one with good concentration and complete awareness and some wisdom and bodhicitta.”

We have paired the refuge ngöndro practice with meditation on the four truths. This further highlights that the purpose of the retreat is not to mindlessly recite the refuge formula, but to explore with energy and interest the reality of our situation in samsara, and how we can get out of it. At the end of your one,

two, or three months of retreat—whether you’ve finished your 111,111 recitations or not—we trust that you’ll have deepened your understanding of the external Three Jewels, and strengthened your aspiration to actualize the inner Three Jewels.

### Retreat Support

Each week, Sravasti Abbey will send weekly emails to support your practice. These emails will include links to video teachings on the retreat topic, excerpts from books and talks, meditation outlines, and more.

We will continue to post three short talks (Bodhisattva’s Breakfast Corner) each week on the [Sravasti Abbey YouTube Channel](#), which will address the topic of retreat in general, and more specifically the topic of refuge and the four truths. Longer teachings will also be given as part of the ongoing study curriculum at Sravasti Abbey. See our calendar [here](#).

To meditate with a group, consider joining a group of Abbey friends who meditate together each day on Zoom. They will lead the practice of the retreat from Sunday through Friday each morning, and in the evenings on Monday through Thursday and on Saturday. Every Saturday morning, an Abbey monastic will lead the practice. Find out more [here](#).

If you would like to be in touch with other retreatants, please see the RFA Participant [Google Doc](#). You can add your contact information, opt-in to Facebook and/or Discussion Groups, and/or reach out to others who have shared their information. **Sravasti Abbey does not monitor this document and accepts no responsibility for the sharing of personal details on this page.**

### Registration

If you have not yet registered, please fill out [this form](#).

To help our resident community connect with our fellow retreatants (from afar), take part in our digital photo wall. **Title the photo with your name and country** and drag and drop it into [this folder](#).

### Preparing for Retreat

It is helpful to prepare for retreat before it begins by familiarizing yourself with the practice. You can find the meditation outline [here](#). Before retreat, please watch or read Venerable Chodron’s [teachings on the refuge ngöndro practice](#). They include two longer talks about doing retreat, and shorter talks on the practice itself.

An excellent resource to begin your studies of refuge and the four truths is the Library of Wisdom and Compassion:

- Volume 4, [Following in the Buddha’s Footsteps](#), covers the topic of refuge in detail. Live teachings on this book can be found [here](#).
- Volume 3, [Samsara, Nirvana, and Buddha Nature](#), covers the four truths—true dukkha, true origins, true cessations, and true paths—with a focus on the unsatisfactory conditions of samsara, and the afflictions. Live teachings on this book can be found [here](#).

- Volume 2, [The Foundation of Buddhist Practice](#), explores the topic of relating to a spiritual mentor, as well as pith advice on how to structure a meditation session. Live teachings on this book can be found [here](#).

Venerable Thubten Chonyi has also been giving weekly teachings on the refuge ngöndro practice, including guided meditations. Watch those [here](#).

### Other valuable resources

- **Watch or read:** Venerable Thubten Chodron's 2009 & 2016 teachings on the refuge ngöndro [here](#).
- **Watch:** Venerable Thubten Chodron gives a 7-part series on refuge, reading from Following in the Buddha's Footsteps [here](#).
- **Read:** Venerable Thubten Chodron's (Seattle, 1991-4) teachings on [refuge](#) & [the four truths](#) from Lama Tsongkhapa's *lamrim chenmo*.
- **Watch:** A series of short talks on how to rely on a spiritual mentor [here](#).
- **Watch:** [Short talks](#) on the meaning of taking refuge (21 videos, #31-51), how to do the refuge ngöndro (12 videos, #52-63), and the four truths (#86-131).
- **Watch or read:** Venerable Thubten Chodron's [12-part series of short talks on the 16 attributes](#) of the Four Truths.
- **Watch or read:** Venerable Thubten Chodron's [6-part series on the "Happiness and Suffering"](#), covering the Four Truths from the Pali and Sanskrit traditions. The first two talks include transcripts.
- **Watch:** Venerable Thubten Chodron's [4-part series on the Four Noble Truths](#) covering the 16 attributes of the four truths.
- **Watch:** short talks that explain the seven-limb prayer [here](#).

For more teachings, take a look at our [YouTube Channel](#), and [ThubtenChodron.org](#).

### Session outline

Each retreat session should include:

- Begin with a few minutes of breathing meditation to settle the mind
- Set a bodhicitta motivation
- Set up the refuge visualization as described in the [Refuge Ngondro Meditation Outline](#)
- Continue with the abbreviated recitations
- After the mandala offering, recite the refuge formula *Namo Gurubhya. Namō Buddhaya, Namō Dharmaya, Namō Sanghaya*<sup>1</sup> for however long you wish
- Absorb the refuge visualization, and dedicate the merit.
- You can do analytic reflection on any topic related to taking refuge or the four truths, including: causes for refuge, the qualities of each of the refuge objects, the four truths, the results of the path, and so forth. You can use this as your motivation for the practice, after you do the visualization, before you commence the mantra, or after the mantra recitation before the

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<sup>1</sup> Venerable Chodron recommends completing the mantra recitation for one object of refuge at a time, starting with *Namo Buddhaya*. This would mean you would complete 111,111 *Namo Buddhaya* before moving onto *Namo Dharmaya*, then *Namo Sanghaya*, doing *Namo Gurubhya* last.

dissolution. You can also insert these reflections during the opening recitations, such as the seven-limb prayer. Use the analysis to boost your understanding of taking refuge.

Consider joining the Lay Practitioner Practice Group to experience a guided meditation. They meet on Zoom daily at 5:30 am Pacific Time, and 6:00 pm Pacific Time Monday through Thursday and on Saturdays. Find out more [here](#).

### Topic outline for 3-month Retreat from Afar

During retreat (January 5-March 22, 2024), Sravasti Abbey will send weekly emails to support your practice. These emails will include links to video teachings on the retreat topic, excerpts from books and other talks, meditations outlines, and more. We will structure the content of these emails according to the outline below.

Please know that the topic outline, and the content of the emails, is just a “hint” about how you can structure your retreat. Please tailor your study, reflection, and meditation to your own interests and needs.

For example, if you find yourself taken by a particular topic and wish to explore it more deeply, don’t feel like you need to “keep up” with the content of the weekly emails. Pursue what is bringing joy and understanding in your own practice—the resources shared can then be a useful tool for future study.

<b>Week</b>	<b>Start Date</b>	<b>Topic of meditation</b>
1	January 5	Taking a Safe Direction in Life: What is refuge?
2	January 12	Introducing Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha
3	January 19	Qualities of the Buddha
4	January 26	True Duhkha & Origins
5	February 2	Qualities of the Dharma
6	February 9	Qualities of the Sangha
7	February 16	True Cessations & True Paths
8	February 23	Why We Need a Teacher
9	March 1	Relying on a Spiritual Mentor
10	March 8	Training in Refuge
11	March 15	Refuge as a Lifetime Practice
12	March 22	Dedication & Invitation for Post-Retreat Gathering

## Frequently Asked Questions—Refuge Ngöndro

### **Q. I don't want to count mantra—can I still participate?**

A. Yes. If accumulating the 111,111 recitations of the refuge formula does not appeal to you, don't let that get in the way of participating in the retreat. You can do the daily practice, reciting the refuge formula as much as you would like.

### **Q. I don't think I'll finish the mantra count by the end of retreat—what do I do?**

A. Keep going! There's no pressure to finish the ngöndro by the end of the three-month retreat. You can continue your daily practice and recitation of the refuge formula until you finish the 111,111 recitations. But remember, you need to do at least mala every day to sustain the ngöndro commitment.

### **Q. Do I have to have taken refuge formally before doing this retreat?**

A. No. To participate in this retreat, there is no requirement that you have taken refuge in a formal ceremony. This retreat is a wonderful way to prepare for formally taking refuge. If you have formally taken refuge, this is a wonderful way to deepen your refuge.

### **Q. I skipped a day of practice. Do I have to restart my mantra count?**

Technically, yes. Traditionally, the mantra count is accumulated daily, with no breaks in-between. If you miss a day of practice, you restart your count. However if this is discouraging or you do not want to hold it so strictly, that is up to you. The most important thing is your motivation, and wish to study and practice the Dharma.

### **Q. What do I do once I've finished the mantra count?**

A. Rejoice! Take the time to really rejoice in the effort you've made throughout retreat to study, reflect, and meditate on the Buddha's teachings. It's a great time to reflect on how your mind has changed over the course of retreat, what you have learned, and what things you want to take forward in your practice. Make [special dedication prayers](#) to direct all the merit you've generated for the welfare of all sentient beings. And most important—continue your daily practice! This could be the [Meditation on the Buddha](#), or any other practice you feel connected with. You're welcome to write your retreat experience to share with the Abbey. Sometimes we post these on the website to inspire others.

## Frequently Asked Questions—Logistics

### **Q. Does the Retreat from Afar cost anything to participate in?**

A. All courses and teachings from Sravasti Abbey are offered freely, including the Retreat from Afar. The Abbey runs entirely on donations from our kind supporters, so if you would like to make an offering to the Abbey, that would be gratefully received. Offerings of all kinds (money, food, offering service) are welcome. You can find out more here: <https://sravastiabbey.org/giving/>

### **Q. I'm not sure I want to participate in three months of retreat. Is it okay if I only do one month?**

A. Yes. You can choose to participate in the Retreat from Afar for either one, two or three months. If you are unsure, it is good to set yourself an initial timeframe of one month and follow that through. Then, if you want to increase the length of your retreat, for another one or two months, you can do that. You don't need to tell us how long you plan to participate. We will send you the weekly emails for the full three months unless you request otherwise.

**Q. I've never done a retreat before. Am I qualified to take part in this retreat?**

A. Yes. You can structure your Retreat from Afar in a way that suits your level of practice. You can start with one session a day, for 30 minutes, and slowly get familiar with the practice text and the analytic meditations. There are many resources online to help you with this. As you get more familiar, you can increase the length of your sessions in small increments (e.g. 5 minutes) building up to 45-60 minutes if you wish.

**Q. What time of day should I meditate?**

A. We encourage people to meditate first thing in the morning, when the mind is most fresh and clear. Setting a strong motivation and spending some time in meditation in the morning really helps set the tone of the day, allowing love, compassion, and wisdom to guide your actions of body, speech and mind. However, we understand this is not possible for some people for various reasons. Please meditate when it fits best into your schedule, and where you can really settle the mind and focus on what you are doing.

**Q. Is there a way to connect with other retreatants from afar? It would be nice to have a regular discussion group about the practice.**

If you would like to be in touch with other retreatants, please see the RFA Participant [Google Doc](#). You can add your contact information, opt-in to Facebook and/or Discussion Groups, and/or reach out to others who have shared their information.

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**Q. What happens if I have questions come up during retreat?**

A. The Sravasti Abbey community will be in silent retreat, and not actively monitoring emails. However, you can write to us ([retreat@sravastiabbey.org](mailto:retreat@sravastiabbey.org)) with questions about the practice, which residents may answer in the short pre-lunch talks that are posted to the Sravasti Abbey YouTube channel. We hope the support and resources provided in the weekly emails will also answer many questions that may arise.

**Q. What is the retreat schedule Abbey residents will follow? I want to use that as a model for my retreat and try to meditate at times when the Abbey monastics are meditating.**

A. Below is the daily schedule of Sravasti Abbey residents during Winter Retreat. Keep in mind that the schedule changes when we have weekly teachings.

If you have not done long-retreat before, it is helpful to build up your meditation practice slowly. Start with a one-day retreat with four meditation sessions. After that, you could try a weekend retreat. It's important to not have a tight mind that is pushing yourself to do more than you are ready for. Rather, we build up our practice slowly and steadily, so that we can have a joyful mind that is happy and satisfied with what we have been able to do.

5:00 am	Wake up
5:30 – 7:00	Meditation Session 1
7:30	Breakfast
8:45 - 10:00	Meditation Session 2
10:30 – 11:45	Meditation Session 3
Noon	Lunch
2:45 - 4:00 pm	Meditation Session 4
4:00 – 6:00	Study time
6:00	Medicine meal
7:00 – 8:15	Meditation Session 5
8:15 – 10:00	Study time / rest

May this retreat bring great benefit to all beings!

### **Dedication for a Meaningful Life**

*Whatever actions I do—eating, walking, sitting, sleeping, working, and so forth—and whatever I experience in life—up or down, happiness or pain, healthy or sick, harmony or discord, success or failure, wealth or poverty, praise or criticism—whether I am living or dying, or even born in a horrible rebirth; whether I live long or not—may my life be beneficial for all sentient beings. The main purpose of my life is not simply to be rich, respected, famous, healthy, and happy. The meaning of my life is to benefit all sentient beings. Therefore, from now on, may whatever actions I do be beneficial for all beings. May whatever I experience in life—happiness or suffering—be dedicated to actualizing the path to awakening. May whatever I do, say, or think benefit all sentient beings and help them to attain full awakening quickly.*

[Lama Zopa Rinpoche.](#)