

Winter Solstice Retreat: Embracing the Dark, Inviting the Light

Teaching Team: Dawn Scott, Devon Hase, Yong Oh, and Kimi Mojica (Movement)

Overview

The Winter Solstice marks the turning point of the year — the longest night, followed by the gradual return of the light.

Across cultures and traditions, this sacred moment invites reflection, renewal, and reconnection with the rhythms of nature and the cycles within us.

Each winter, the world offers its oldest teaching: the turning of the light.

The Solstice is both an outer and inner threshold — when darkness reaches its culmination and light begins its gradual return.

This retreat is an archetypal and embodied journey — from grounding in presence and friendship, through descent into darkness and transformation, toward renewal and regeneration.

Drawing on Buddhist meditation, mindful movement, and ancient ritual, the teachers guide you through a meditative unfolding: stillness, release, illumination, and return.

Through meditation, movement, and ritual, you'll learn how to:

- **Meet the darkness — inner and outer — with courage and compassion**
- **Transform dukkha (suffering) into wisdom and equanimity**
- **Let go of patterns that no longer serve your awakening**
- **Reconnect to the elements and natural cycles of life**
- **Celebrate light through ritual, gratitude, and spiritual friendship**

We learn that darkness is not the absence of light, but its fertile ground.

Through this journey, we remember that awakening is never solitary — it unfolds in community, in nature, and in relationship.

Together, we become lights in the dark for one another.

This course offers a powerful framework for both winter reflection and year-round renewal.

What Is the Winter Solstice?

The Winter Solstice is the turning point of the year — the moment when the sun pauses in its descent, and the longest night gives way to the slow return of light.

In the Northern Hemisphere, it usually falls around December 21, marking the beginning of winter and symbolizing a time of stillness, reflection, and renewal.

Across cultures and centuries, people have honored the Solstice as a sacred threshold: a moment to release the old, plant intentions for the new, and remember our deep connection to the cycles of nature.

It reminds us that darkness and light are not opposites, but partners in the rhythm of life — that rest and renewal, loss and growth, are all part of one living continuum.

In the language of the Dharma, the Solstice mirrors the inner path of awakening: descending into stillness, meeting what is difficult with compassion, and emerging renewed in clarity and light.

The Solstice teaches that even in the darkest night, the light is already returning.

Why Take This Retreat

Each year, the Winter Solstice calls us to pause — to honor the dark, to rest deeply, and to listen for the light returning.

This retreat offers a sacred space to do just that. Amid the noise and urgency of modern life, it invites you to slow down, breathe, and reconnect with what's timeless.

In stillness, movement, and ritual, you'll discover that darkness is not something to escape, but a teacher — a place of wisdom, creativity, and rebirth.

You'll learn to meet life's uncertainties with courage, to let go of what no longer serves your heart, and to open to the quiet joy that arises when we stop striving and begin to trust.

This retreat matters because the world needs light-bearers — people who can hold presence amid change, who can listen deeply, and who remember our shared belonging with one another and the Earth.

When we sit together on the longest night, we remember that the light has never truly left — it has only been waiting for us to turn toward it.

Through this retreat, you'll return home renewed — with practices to sustain balance and presence throughout the year, and a heart that shines a little brighter in the dark.

Why It Matters Now

We live in a time of immense change, noise, and uncertainty. The solstice reminds us that stillness, not speed, brings renewal.

This retreat helps you remember what's always been true:

- **Wisdom arises from the dark.** The very places we resist — loss, rest, grief, uncertainty — hold the seeds of transformation.
- **We awaken together.** The warmth of spiritual friendship lights our way through the unknown.
- **Ritual restores meaning.** In community, we reconnect with the larger cycles of life
- **Nature is our mirror.** Just as the light returns after the longest night, so too can clarity, joy, and compassion return to the heart.

Through meditation, movement, and reflection, you'll rediscover an intimacy with life that extends far beyond this season — a way of living in rhythm with both shadow and light.

“In the deepest darkness, the light is already returning.
To sit quietly, to breathe, to feel the pulse of life within and around you —
this is how we remember the way home.”

— Heather Sundberg

What You'll Gain from This Retreat

The Winter Solstice Retreat offers more than a week of practice — it offers a way to live in harmony with life's deepest cycles.

Through meditation, mindful movement, and sacred ritual, you'll cultivate the qualities that allow renewal to take root.

Personal Benefits

- **Inner Renewal** – Rest deeply in silence and reconnect with what matters most.
- **Resilience in Uncertainty** – Learn to meet darkness — inner or outer — with steadiness and grace.
- **Emotional Balance** – Transform difficulty and dukkha into wisdom through compassion and equanimity.
- **Embodied Presence** – Reawaken trust in your body as a source of grounding and knowing.
- **Clarity and Purpose** – Let go of what no longer serves you and reconnect with your values.

Spiritual Benefits

- **Integration of Darkness and Light** – Experience the natural rhythm of descent and renewal as part of awakening.
- **Connection to Lineage and Ritual** – Engage in ancient practices of taking refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha.
- **Deepened Practice** – Strengthen mindfulness, insight, and heart qualities through guided meditations and practice.
- **Spiritual Friendship** – Feel the nourishment of Sangha — awakening together through presence and care.

Suggested Learning Paths

-  **30-Day Journey** — move through one module every five days
-  **9-Week Journey** — pair one module each week with guided practice and reflection

-  **At Your Own Pace** — listen and practice in your own rhythm through the season

This retreat is both a spiritual journey and a seasonal rite of passage. Over the course of six modules, you'll move from stillness and descent into darkness, through surrender and insight, toward renewal, friendship, and light. The teachings weave meditation, Dharma, movement, and ritual into a living cycle of transformation.

Day One: Requisites for the Journey — Grounding in Presence and Spiritual Friendship

Preparing the ground — arriving in silence, presence, and relational refuge

We begin by slowing down and arriving fully. Through noble silence and embodied awareness, you'll learn to turn down the noise of outer life and awaken to inner stillness.

The first day establishes the foundations of practice: refuge, presence, and friendship.

We explore *kalyāṇa-mitta* — the practice of spiritual friendship — as the ground of the path. The Buddha called it “the whole of the holy life.” Companionship and care become the field through which awakening unfolds.

Day Two: Embarking on the Journey — Befriending the Body and Challenging Mind States

Cultivating trust in the body and compassion for the mind

We enter the heart of practice through resting in the elemental nature of the body. The teachers invite you to meet the body as wise and trustworthy — and to face the mind's obstacles with patience and curiosity.

Here, we work with the Five Hindrances (craving, aversion, restlessness, sloth, and doubt), learning to recognize them as part of the path rather than obstacles to it.

Awareness transforms what binds us into fuel for awakening.

Day Three: Descent into Darkness, Ascent into Light — Ritual as a Gateway to Devotion

Meeting transformation through ritual, lineage, and the turning of the year

This is the heart of the retreat — a sacred ritual of release and renewal.

We enter darkness together, invoking the *devas*, chanting, and offering our intentions. Gradually, the light returns as candles are lit one by one, symbolizing the slow dawn of benevolence and wisdom.

The Solstice Ritual is an ancient technology of meaning — connecting us to nature, the elements, and our Dharma lineage.

Day Four: Returning Home — Integrating the Journey

Carrying the light forward — sustaining insight, compassion, and belonging

We close by returning home — not as who we were, but as who we've become.

Integration means weaving what's been revealed through silence, movement, and ritual into the fabric of daily life.

We explore how to live rhythmically — aligning our lives with natural cycles, honoring both darkness and light, solitude and connection.

Returning home is the final ritual: bringing the candle of practice into every aspect of life.

Key Course Themes

- Darkness as fertile ground for wisdom
- Dukkha as doorway, not defect
- The body as bridge between inner and outer nature
- Ritual as communal awakening
- Spiritual friendship as illumination
- Freedom is possible in all conditions

Teachers

Dawn Scott

Dawn Scott has been practicing Insight Meditation since 2008. She is a graduate of the Insight Meditation Society's teacher training program and is a core teacher of Spirit Rock's Liberation, Emptiness, and Awareness Practices (LEAP) Program. Dawn has a deep love of long retreat practice and the Buddha's liberative teachings.

devon hase, MA

devon hase has practiced intensively in the Insight and vajrayana traditions since discovering meditation in 2000. She now teaches at the Insight Meditation Society, Spirit Rock Meditation Center, and the Forest Refuge. She co-authored *How Not to Be a Hot Mess* and the forthcoming *This Messy, Gorgeous Love*.

Yong Oh

Yong is a core teacher at the Durango Dharma Center and at Sacred Mountain Saṅgha. Yong has a particular interest in nature Dharma, devotional expression, and supporting caregivers as well as communities of color in the Dharma. For more, visit yongoh.com.

Heather Sundberg

Heather Sundberg has taught insight meditation since 1999, and completed the Spirit Rock/IMS Teacher Training. For the last three decades, Heather has studied with senior teachers in the Insight Meditation and Vajrayana traditions, completing 3.5 accumulated years of retreat. Her teaching emphasizes embodiment, heart practice, and emptiness-awareness practices. www.heathersundberg.com.

Kimi Mojica

Born on the unceded Ohlone lands of Yelamu (San Francisco, CA), Kimi is currently based in unceded Ohlone Territory in Huchiun (Oakland, CA). They can be found seeking refuge on the water, learning from plant allies medicine, and building ecosystems of community care with their Kajukenbo martial arts community.