



Andrew Holecek: If you look at so many of the words for awakening, these are terms of negation, right? *Nirvana*, extinction; *nirodha*, literally cessation; *nirguna*, without attributes; *nirvikalpa*, without thought; nonduality, right? These are all terms of negation. And so what one discovers through this journey of the *via negativa*, the apophatic way, releasing, negating, letting go, letting go, letting go, that's just a euphemism for dying. That's the dying part. And as you let go, let go, let go, you're dying, dying, and as you're dying, dying, you're dropping, dropping, dropping. And as you're going down, it's healing that's in the wake as you descend. The farther down you go, the more you heal. You heal all these fractured dimensions of your being. All the fractured dimensions of your psyche, all these aspects are brought up in the dark. And you have this extraordinarily precious opportunity to relate to them, to integrate them, to heal them.

James Shaheen: Hello and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Andrew Holecek. Andrew is an author and spiritual teacher in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, and he leads seminars and retreats on meditation, dream yoga, and death and dying. In his new book, *Total Eclipse of the Mind: Unleashing the Power of Darkness for Creativity, Healing and Transformation*, he lays out a comprehensive introduction to the practice of dark retreat and how it can utterly transform our relationship to ourselves and the world. In my conversation with Andrew, we talk about what exactly a dark retreat is, why he views dark retreat as the most transformative practice he's done, how spending time in darkness can help us recover a lost way of seeing, and what the darkness can teach us about our unconscious mind. So here's my conversation with Andrew Holecek.

James Shaheen: Okay, so I'm here with Andrew Holecek. Hi Andrew. It's great to be with you.

Andrew Holecek: James, it's always so much fun to hang with you.



James Shaheen: Yeah, likewise. So Andrew, we're here to talk about your new book, *Total Eclipse of the Mind: Unleashing the Power of Darkness for Creativity, Healing, and Transformation*. So to start, can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

Andrew Holecek: Yeah, this is a topic that I've been deeply interested in and practicing for, actually it'll be thirty years this summer when I was first introduced to the topic of dark retreat. And I've been doing it pretty consistently and concerted for a really long time. And so what triggered it, James, was I go in at least once or twice a year to do my annual or semiannual retreats, and I had a particularly transformative, impactful journey, a ten-day retreat about two and a half years ago where at the end of this retreat this entire book, I mean, I've never had a book, this will be my tenth book, kind of burst into my mind like this. I mean, dare I say, I channeled the damn thing. So on one level it was the easiest book to write because I could just put words to paper as quickly as they could come out. But on another level it became one of the more challenging books because the topic itself is difficult to write about. And so I came out, and I'll pause for a second, to speak about this topic, and I have to say this at the outset, just as much to keep people out as to invite people in because the toothpaste is out of the tube. You may know, in the zeitgeist this dark retreat thing is really—

James Shaheen: Aaron Rodgers went on a dark retreat.

Andrew Holecek: Yeah. Kind of amazing. More and more celebrities, entrepreneurs, billionaires, tech people are coming in talking about it. So the word is definitely out. And the practice is incredibly transformative, it has tremendous promise, but it also has directly proportional peril. In other words, if it's not done with some guidelines, you can hurt yourself with this practice, and it's not like I have the AAA gold standard for how to do this thing. But I have traditional support. In fact, Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche wrote the foreword to this book. Anam Thubten is behind it. I'm working with a number of science labs. We have four studies going on to substantiate some of the radical claims around this practice, like why is it so transformative? And so it just seems like it's appropriate. The timing seems to be right to put



some material out in the world that could be a benefit to create some guidelines for how to engage in this really unusual practice.

James Shaheen: Well, tell us what a dark retreat is, because some listeners may not have heard of it.

Andrew Holecek: Yeah, totally. Yes, exactly. So it's a traditional practice that you'll find historically the Egyptians were doing analogous practices thousands and thousands of years ago. You'll find really interesting references to it in the pre-Socratics, especially the work of Parmenides. You'll find it in the Neoplatonic tradition, people like Iamblichus, Proclus, and Plotinus. The Indigenous populations like the Colombian Kogi engage in it. You'll find it in Daoism. And then what a surprise, Tibetan Buddhist tradition has really explored this within the context of bardo yoga.

But what it is, very briefly, I can say a little bit about the kind of setup and then specifically what one does there in the different types of dark practice. It's when you go into a specially prepared cabin or cave for a certain amount of time that is 100 percent dark. I mean, it is the darkest dark you can imagine. And it's not merely the sensory deprivation of one's vision but sound as well. So it's as close as you can get to a complete sensory deprivation situation outside of a flotation tank. And I've done those, but you can't float in a tank for more than a couple hours without being pickled.

James Shaheen: So when did you first start doing this practice?

Andrew Holecek: Yeah, I started studying it with one of my main teachers in 1996, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, in the context of a twelve-year set of teachings he gave that really to this day remains the most concerted exploration of the depths of the Tibetan Buddhist array of teachings. I mean, we studied, you name it, Mahamudra, Kalachakra, Guhyasamaja, *trekcho*, *togal*, the profound yogas. It was an unbelievable journey. And in 1996, toward the latter part of



this twelve-year curriculum, he introduced this practice within the context of Dzogchen and in specifically the context of what's called the *togal* practices, which are arguably, you know, everybody says that they have the highest teachings, but by many accounts, these are among the highest, if not the highest, of all teachings in the Tibetan Buddhist array. And so I started studying it in 1996, and I started practicing it shortly thereafter, mostly at home.

Khenpo Rinpoche would say, it was very sweet, he'd say, just go into your bathroom and throw a towel under the door and tape off the windows. I basically said, well, I can do that in my closet. So I mean, tongue in cheek, I became a true closet meditator. So I would shut the closet, go in there for a couple hours, and I'd go, “This is kind of cool.” And then I started going in for a couple days, and then I started getting official secondary, I wouldn't say secondary, but more applied guidance from Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, who is Khenpo Rinpoche's main dharma heir. I went to him shortly thereafter, probably twenty-five years ago or so, and said, “Hey, I'm really interested in doing formal retreat.” And I remember back then there was almost no place to go to do this. I mean, these centers were not around. And so Rinpoche said, “Well, you know, start with three days, see how that is, and then you can slowly work your way up.” And so what I did was I booked a center. I booked the place for a week. Being somewhat anxious but also excited, I actually went in for one day. I said, “Oh, twenty-four hours, I can do this.” I took a little breather and in the context of that same retreat went back in for three days. “Oh, I can do that.” And then slowly over the course of following years and then decades I dripped it, titrated it, to do longer and longer durations.

But here's one thing I want to say right out of the gates, James. This practice is about quality and not quantity. Who cares how long you're in there? In fact, this is the only time people really can get in trouble with this practice, because if they set these self-imposed metrics, yeah, you know, you can cross the finish line, whether it's three days or whatever, bruised and battered. and what's the point? I mean, the only thing that's going to happen is your ego is just going to be strengthened. So I say this right at the outset. It doesn't matter how long you're in there. What



matters is the quality of the practice, what you're doing, not the quantity. In fact, what I'm working with now, we can talk about this a little bit later, is I'm starting to write and teach even more on this, is what we're languaging as gray retreat, which is a more graduated, titrated weaving in and out approach that, to me, this is the way to engage in this medicine because we can talk a little bit about some of the challenges.

But one of the really extraordinary aspects of this practice, and this is one reason so many of the scientists I'm working with are really interested in it. A number of these researchers are doing research in psychedelics. And when I talk to them a little bit about what dark medicine is about, dark retreats about, they go, “Oh my gosh, this is amazing, the parallels between this and psychedelic research.” And one of the issues here, just like with psychedelics, is dosage. You can overdose on yourself in this practice. So getting that dosage right, you know, not too tight, not too loose. You can underdose, you can overdose. That's one of the tricks behind this. And that's why the titrated gray retreat, I think, is really the way to go. So I can say more about that in a bit, but that's kind of how I got into it and what it's about.

James Shaheen: So you've explored a number of approaches to spiritual development over the years, yet you say that none of them compare to your experience of dark retreat. So I was surprised by that considering all of the different practices you've done over decades. So why is dark retreat the most transformative practice you've done?

Andrew Holecek: Yeah, and it really is, and I can situate it within the context of some of the other stuff I've written and taught about over the years. The practice of dark retreat actually is situated just very briefly parenthetically in my schema of nocturnal meditations, just situated within, like you mentioned, some of the stuff that I previously riffed on. In my schema of the nocturnal meditations, there are five of these practices. There's liminal dreaming, lucid dreaming, dream yoga, sleep yoga, and then bardo yoga. And there's a sequence with these: Each practice transcends but includes its predecessor, and therefore bardo yoga transcends what includes all the previous practices. And so to address that really great question, spot on, James, for me, the



practice is so incredibly impactful because it's a little bit like Rudy Gobert, the NBA superstar, said something really quite compelling about it. When he came out after three days, he said that dark retreat is meditation times a thousand. Maybe slightly hyperbolic, but I think you get the idea.

This is helpful to demystify the practice. It's just really special to work with your mind and your heart and your body in one of the most concentrated environments possible where there's literally zero distraction. There's literally no way to run away from yourself. In fact, one of the most compelling revelations is in fact how we spend most of our lives trying to run away from ourselves, and I can say a little bit more about that. And so it's just the steep quality, the fact that wherever you go, there you are, as Jon Kabat-Zinn said, that you can't get away from yourself. And because of that, you learn more about who you are and who you are not in the shortest possible time. I've talked to at this point dozens and dozens and dozens, I've listened to probably 500 different people coming out talking about it. I've personally had contacts with dozens and dozens of people, and I'm really interested in the long term *tantrikas*, the people who've been engaged in Tibetan tantric Buddhism for twenty, thirty years. And so I went in with a gal, because at this point, two years ago, I wanted to introduce her to a retreat situation, and this is a person who'd been engaged in Tibetan tantric Buddhism for thirty years, and she came out and she said, “Andrew, I learned more about myself, and I've been more transformed in these three days than in thirty years of practice.”

And so is this wildly unusual? Is this just ridiculously hyperbolic? Maybe, but maybe not. This is one reason I'm so jazzed about it and also one reason I'm really interested academically and even scientifically in studying the phenomenology of transformation. What is really going on here? And I can share what I think is really going on. Why is this practice so transformative? Why is the return on investment, the ROI, just so ridiculous? And that's one reason why on a very positive note, yes, I want to keep the unprepared choppers out, but I also do want to invite or at



least convey to properly prepared practitioners that there's just tremendous transformative potential in this practice.

James Shaheen: You know, you say that darkness shows us who we truly are and, and that's not easy all the time. So in other words, you say truth heals, but how much truth can you take?

Andrew Holecek: Well, T. S. Eliot, humankind cannot bear very much reality. How much truth can you handle? Spot on. So this is where it ties in so magnificently to bardo yoga and to the death prep practices, because you'll see how this applies because according to the bardo teachings, at the moment of death, for those who are Tibetan Buddhists who might be listening, when what's called luminous bardo or *dharmata* is revealed, *dharmata* is just the word for reality or suchness. The traditions proclaim that the thermonuclear power of the awakened mind is just released, and you drop into this amazing bed of awakened mind. And then what the tradition says is that without some familiarity with this dimension of your being—by the way, the very definition of the word meditation in the Tibetan language *gom* is to become familiar with—what happens is that that radiance, that light, that luminosity, that emptiness is so dazzling, so true, so real that from the perspective of fake news, that would be ego architecture, it's just way too bright. It's just too real. It's just too intense. And so what do we do? Well, we contract. We run away from the bardo not really in self-defense but in self-generation. And so this then talks quite elegantly about the kind of process, the phenomenology, I use that term a lot, of what actually brings about the construction of the self sense.

And so what we do on the bardo is we just continue to distract. Literally the word distract means to pull apart. We just continue to pull apart, break apart, dismember, fracture away from reality. And then what constitutes the rebirth process through the bardo of becoming and then into the bardo of this life—and then by the way, this process is continually recapitulated in this life. I argue it in my work that, in fact, this process of reiterative fracturing, dismemberment,



distraction is basically the root cause of the metacrisis, the root cause of our dark age, the *Kali-yuga*, which ironically is largely brought about by too much light, light pollution.

And so what happens in the dark is the mind opens, it relaxes. It really is like entering the death space. The mind falls into itself. The word in Tibetan, because I know some listeners are students of Tibetan Buddhism, is called *rangbop*, self-fall. The mind in the dark, just like in the bardo of dying, falls into itself. And as it continues to fall, it falls and falls and falls fundamentally into this groundless reduction base. And then depending on our familiarity with it, our ability to recognize that dimension of truth and reality, we can either rest deeply and experience all the magnificently restorative aspects of this deep dissent into the nature of the mind, or just like in the bardo teachings, we're going to contract away from it. We're going to run away from it, we're going to distract.

And so I'm exaggerating just a tiny bit here for theatrical purposes, but I do this thought experiment. Imagine you're in the dark for an hour or two. “Oh, this is kind of cool. I can relate to this.” Imagine you're in for six hours. Starting to warm up just a little bit. Imagine that you're in for a day. Again, you get a little hot in here. Imagine that you're in for two days, three days a week. What might be your reaction after X amount of days when you're in there? I mean, there could be, perhaps, I might be exaggerating, but not much, this urge to kind of break down the door and run out screaming, to get away, to get away. Here's the question. From what? To get away from what? To distract, pull apart from what? From who? From you.

So the urge in the dark is allegedly the same urge that takes place on the bardos and, by the way, upon close examination takes place moment to moment. This microphenomenology takes place moment to moment. The dark reveals our insatiable propensities to move. Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche says that of all the habits we have, the greatest of all habits is the habit for movement itself. I mean, how interesting is that? And so what happens in the dark when you feel the urge to get out of there? What are you really trying to get away from? It's not the dark. The dark is just neutral. It's just dark. It's just a metaphysical mirror. You're trying to get away from yourself, and



so therefore, just like in the bardos, then you realize, oh my gosh, this super sophisticated avoidance strategy is what constitutes the entirety of my life. I spend most of my life distracting myself in an effort to avoid some of these harsh, noble truths of the nature of my being, principally, of course, and this is, I'm going all the way to the end of it, that you don't exist. So I'll pause for a second because you see how excited I get. I can just talk all the air out of the room. So I'll pause to see where you are.

James Shaheen: You know, I find that very interesting, the impulse to move, as somebody said, and I don't know who it was, movement masks, pain, and that's also a simple truth. But you describe dark retreat as recovering a lost way of seeing, which you link to the process of descent and deepening. Can you say more about the power of this descent?

Andrew Holecek: Oh my gosh. Well, two things here, my friend, that are huge. Let me say a little bit about the power of descent and then the power of the reeducation of our senses. So let's put a little dart, a little hold on that second one, because this is a big one as well.

So this is just my languaging, but I like it. I think it's appropriate. I make a distinction between the path of soul and the path of spirit. This is provisionally, I think, helpful. The path of spirit I would associate with height and light, externality, ascent, that kind of thing. And there's nothing wrong with this. I'm not dissing this at all. But if we don't pay close attention to the near enemy of the path of spirit, you get all the pathologies in your enemies of spiritual bypassing. I like to playfully say that if you're just interested in height and light, you're going to get metaphysical sunburn and high altitude sickness. You're just wanting to fundamentally feel better and escape. Like Almaas said, I really like his work, when most people set out on the spiritual path, they're unwittingly setting out for heaven. There's a lot to be said for that.

And so darkness to me is more the path of the soul, the path of depth, interiority, descent. And so in fact, what's so compelling here is it's more in resonance with what I understand as the nondual traditions, where in the nondual traditions higher is replaced with within. The highest practices in



the nondual traditions are not the ones that take you up and out. The highest practices in the nondual tradition are the ones that take you most deeply down and within.

And so this is completely resonant with the journey of the body, the journey of interiority, depth, and authenticity. And so once again, when you go into the dark and everything opens and relaxes, everything dilates. It's really the most amazing thing, that it's not just your eyes that dilate in the dark physiologically but your mind dilates and expands, your body dilates and expands. And I can say more about this extraordinary set of insights that takes place, especially when you're coming out of the dark. You don't realize how open the darkness has invited you to be until you actually come out and you see all the layers of contraction come back on. But as the mind opens, meditation, my favorite definition, habituation to openness. As you go into the dark and you open and you dilate and you relax, you fall deeper and deeper and deeper, as Rumi put it, into wider and wider rings of being.

And as you do that, and this is where it gets super interesting, you experience this extraordinary first-person tour of the archeology in the sedimentation levels of the unconscious mind. And so let me say a little bit about this. This is a big deal. So when I go into the dark, when I start, I'm conscious, and my identity is pretty much consolidated in this contracted form of dimensionality that I consider myself. And by the way, this process I'm about to describe is reiterated every night in a microcosmic form when we fall asleep and according to a number of wisdom traditions will be reinstated yet again when we die. So you can kind of triangulate these processes and understand what's actually taking place here. But you go from fully conscious to preconscious, to subconscious to personal unconscious to collective unconscious. Thank you very much, Carl Jung, depth psychologist. Then that baton is further handed off to the wisdom traditions and handed off to the super so-called unconscious clear light mind.

And so what then ensues, James, is the most extraordinary capacity to see the deposition layers of the sedimentation levels of all these dimensions of your being. And this might seem like, oh, this is just metaphysical mumbo jumbo, what does it really matter? Oh my gosh. This is



enormous because what it does is it allows you to gain intimate familiarity, there's that word again, meditation with all the dimensions of who you are, especially the unbelievable dimensions of the unconscious mind. This is the journey of the soul, the journey into the unconscious mind.

James Shaheen: You describe dark retreat as an act of subtraction or cessation, and in the process it helps us to return to our origins. How is this so?

Andrew Holecek: Yeah, it's the addition of a tool designed for subtraction. I mean, really, on one level, do we really need anything else in life, right? I take greater and greater delight when I remove things from my life. And so what did Meister Eckhart say so beautifully? The soul does not grow by addition, but by subtraction. And again, I do want to come back to the unconscious thing because this is a big deal, but one thing that dark retreat does is it is a massive negator eraser. Basically it negates everything. It puts everything on hold.

Now, this is, I think, an important interjection. Arguably one of the most important terms in both Hinduism and Buddhism is dharma, which is a massively multivalent term. It has at least eleven definitions. But the etymological roots are really compelling. It comes from a root *dhr*, which means to hold in both senses: to hold as in to stop, cease, and to hold as in to contain, as in holding environment, as in mandala. And so both of these principles are deeply at work in the dark. When you go into the dark, again, this is bardo yoga. Everything is put on pause, on hold. Your entire life is put on hold. You're not eating the same way. You're not going to the bathroom the same way. You're not asleep in the same way. Everything is put on hold.

So on one level, that's the *samatha* part, right? That's the cessation part. And through this cessation, and it's interesting how deeply this ties into the nondual thing. I mean, if you look at so many of the words for awakening, these are terms of negation, right? *Nirvana*, extinction; *nirodha*, literally cessation; *nirguna*, without attributes; *nirvikalpa*, without thought; nonduality, right? These are all terms of negation. And so what one discovers through this journey of the via negativa, the apophatic way, releasing, negating, letting go, letting go, letting go, that's just a



euphemism for dying. That's the dying part. You are forced in the dark, just like in death, this by the way is why both of these dark retreat is considered a wrathful, forceful method of liberation. Because just like death, it's uncompromising and nonnegotiable. You don't have a choice in there but to let go of all these habit patterns, these karmic propensities. And as you let go, let go, let go, you're dying, dying, and as you're dying, dying, you're dropping, dropping, dropping. And through this process of cessation and holding, through the mere act of cessation, this is where all the magnificent restorative aspects take place. It's like when we fall into deep dreamless restorative, what's called non-REM or delta sleep, I mean, this is the most restorative dimension of the human condition. In fact, if we don't descend into that space every night, you are going to die.

And so in a very real way, what darkness does is it extends the night. It extends the capacity to restore, to reintegrate, to heal at these most foundational levels. And one last image here that's very helpful for me in terms of what's really fundamentally going on here. For me, this is my languaging, darkness is the color of nonduality. This is where all the restorative miraculous things take place. They don't take place by the addition of anything. All the restoration takes place through the cessations of the distraction, the dismemberment, the fracturing.

Just stop breaking away. Nature will naturally heal. You're returning to what our scientist friends are calling the reduction base of innate wholeness. And so as we relax and hold and hold, the image I have, James, is imagine you break your femur, you break your leg, you go see your orthopedic surgeon. The surgeon puts these fractured aspects into approximation. He lines them up next to each other and then what does he do? See, this is the second definition of hold. He puts them in a cast, he puts them in a holding environment, and so it's therefore through the mere act of holding, in this case containing, that all the natural healing takes place.

And so if you use this kind of archetype, this is another reason why this practice is so transformative and also so challenging because you're going all the way down to these fundamental fractured elements of our being in the dark. And as you're going down, it's healing



that's in the wake as you descend. The farther down you go, the more you heal. You heal all these fractured dimensions of your being. All the fractured dimensions of your psyche, all these aspects are brought up in the dark. And you have this extraordinarily precious opportunity to relate to them, to integrate them, to heal them.

So, again, there's so much to say here, I'll pause. I still want to come back to the unconscious thing, but that's the cessation aspect of it. And so, you know, you erase, erase, erase to point out the unerasable, but this is so important. It's through the act of confinement, cessation, negation. That's what makes it so challenging. That's what makes it so transformative.

James Shaheen: Okay, I am going to grant you your wish. Let's go back to the unconscious.

Andrew Holecek: Okay. So yeah, this is important. So because this will help you understand a number of things, like where's the pressure coming from in the dark? Why is it challenging at first? Why does it get easier? So understanding, and this is a great gift, by the way, of Western structuralism, developmental psychology, all the hundreds of extraordinarily sophisticated Western cartographers of the conscious and unconscious mind, starting with Freud, Jung, and all the heirs. That to me has been a magnificent augmentation to the Eastern more nondual traditions like the Tibetan Buddhist tradition is just understanding the stratified levels of the unconscious mind.

And so just a couple things. Well, first of all, let me say this at the outset. I'll say it, it's a little thick, and then I'll unpack it. The unconscious mind is only unconscious from the perspective of consciousness. What the unconscious mind really is, and you'll see where I'm going, so hang with me for just a second, the unconscious mind is actually a slight misnomer. The unconscious mind in my languaging is more accurately the obfuscated mind, the obscured mind.

Well, okay, what does that mean and why is that important? Well, let's do this little thought experiment. Another one. This is easy. So let's say all our listeners were listening to this during



the day. Let's take a five minute break, and we're going to step outside. We're listening to this during the day, we're going to step outside and we're going to look up. So blue sky, dazzling, it's like, well, this is amazing. When we're looking up, we don't see the thousands, actually millions of stars that are up there. We don't see them. Why? Because they're obfuscated. They're obscured by our sun. And so that sun, our sun in this case, represents waking consciousness. This is the principle source of obfuscation. This is amazing.

What this implies, then, is that these deepest levels, James, light doesn't reveal, light conceals. And so what happens when you go into the dark? And also the other nocturnal meditations do this. Well, what happens? That solar-centric, wake-centric, sight-centric, photocentric, all on the surface of egocentricity. That sun sets, and that allows all the millions of lights of the unconscious mind to shine. See, they've always been there. Those lights have always been there, but they're obfuscated by the power of this one conscious sun. And so when that sun sets in the dark, and I have to share, when I was in the dark retreat many, many years ago, I will never forget this experience. I'm lying on the floor. I mean, it is as black as it can be in there. And it was as if, I have to share this, it was as if I'm looking up, it was as if a curtain had parted in the pitch black cave I was in. And I'm not kidding, I'm not exaggerating. It was as if I was looking into the Milky Way galaxy. It was literally tens of thousands of points of light appeared in this pitch black sky.

And that to me was a really monumental experience. And that's when all this stuff started to click together, because when the mind opens and relaxes, it falls into itself, falls into these deeper levels of mind. And so at first, you drop in, the first part of dark retreat can be really challenging. Well, it's because you're dropping down into the refuse bin of the unconscious mind. One of the higher levels of the stratification of the unconscious mind, I playfully talk about it as is the dimension of the spiders and snakes. This is where all the stuff we refuse in conscious experience is thrown into the refuse bin of this dimension of the unconscious mind. So when you're in the dark and all this crap is coming up, well, it's coming up because you've thrown it down in there,



and it's coming up to be integrated, to be loved, to be held, to be healed. IFS really comes into play here, internal family systems can really help with this. But if you understand this, you go, oh my gosh, this is what I'm paying for. I'm paying for this familiarity with this dimension of my unconscious mind. But see, if you don't understand that below the spiders and snakes, my languaging, are the sages and saints, you're not going to go anywhere. That's the initiation. That's almost the gauntlet. This is going to say, this is not for me. I can't do this. I'm not smart enough. I'm not good enough. This is too scary. I'm out of here. And then you're out of there just the same way. You're out of the present moment, moment to moment to moment. You just continue to run away from yourself. But if you understand you, wait a second, wait a second, they told me this might happen, because this is the refuse coming up. If you understand this is in fact what you're paying for, then what can you do? You can establish a new, healthier, more sane relationship.

James Shaheen: Okay, Andrew, I don't want too much time to pass before we get to a few of the questions that our listeners may be interested in, and I know you're very enthusiastic about this and I appreciate it. I just want to ask a few questions for our listeners. I'm sure they are curious, how would you recommend starting a dark retreat practice? I mean, of course you don't want them to do it at home alone without guidance, but where do you suggest they begin?

Andrew Holecek: Yeah. Thank you for bringing it back to Earth. I just get carried away. So the way to start this at home is you can get these masks. There's three of them out there called Mindfold mask, Manta, then a recent one that I really like called MyHalos. These are really cool eye masks that cost like thirty bucks that have little donuts so you can open your eyes underneath the mask. That's what makes it kind of cool.

So, get one of these masks, put it on, and here's the way I recommend it. I play a little bit on the forty-nine-day model. In fact, hey, let's do our first dark retreat together. You'll see where I'm going with this. Okay, I'm going to ask you and listeners, let's do our first dark retreat together. I'm going to ask you to close your eyes for 4.9 seconds. Here we go. Congratulations. You just did your first dark retreat. I can do that. Okay. Next step. We won't do it for purposes of time, but



you see where I'm going to go here, close your eyes for 49 seconds, right? Oh, I can do that. That's no big deal. I got this dark retreat down. Okay, close your eyes or put on your mask for 4.9 minutes. You've just done your third dark retreat. And then obviously this particular exponential approach eventually kind of melts away, but then it would be 4.9 hours. This is just a heuristic. This is just a set of suggestions. The idea is to drip it, titrate it, see what works for you. Put it on and just say, you know, wow, what is it like to spend this amount of time in this sensory-deprived environment? If you have the mask on, it becomes really, really interesting.

I do this every single day now. So I have my little dark room here. I step in, because there's something about full-body saturation. Closet space, like I mentioned forty-five minutes ago, bathroom space. Light penetrates the skin. There's something quite interesting about the difference between having a mask on and having your whole body in the dark.

But the whole idea here is anybody can do this. I mean, you do a miniature dark retreat every time you take a nap. Every time you go to sleep at night, you're doing a miniature dark retreat. This is just a way to extend those basic principles in a much less intimidating way, hence the notion of gray. In other words, you're mixing, you're coming in and out. In this regard, anybody can do this practice. Really, anybody with a sense of curiosity that wants to become familiar with the darkness and what darkness represents, you know, the depth, nuance, and whatnot.

And then James, and I'll pause for a second. Then at a certain point you may go, “Geez, I would like to go to a dark retreat center.” There aren't that many, but trust me, they're popping up all over the place. Dark Havens, my friend Keen Being runs in Vermont; Sky Cave, my friend Scott Berman runs in Oregon. New centers are popping up in Asheville. I mean, they're popping up all over the place. There's something quite lovely about going for one day, two days, three days in an environment where you have a guide, somebody comes in to feed you. That would be the next step. And then after that, then it would be helpful to have a teacher or someone who could really guide you and instruct you through deeper dimensions of this practice, because otherwise you can just fall down a rabbit hole of self-deception and it can become unnecessarily problematic.



But if you go in with this super graduated titrated way, play with it, and I mean that, play with it as much as you work with it, what I found over and over is the darkness will show you the way. The darkness will show you the way.

James Shaheen: So Andrew, you mentioned how important it is to properly prepare for a time in darkness, but it's also important you say to have a way to integrate your insights post-retreat. So could you talk about the role of integration here?

Andrew Holecek: Yeah, this is huge. Thank you so much for bringing this up. This is a really big deal because otherwise, like with a psychedelic experience, just like with any retreat experience, what do you do with the experience? You can become a state junkie. And by that what I mean is whether it's psychedelics, dark retreat meditation, they cultivate initially particular states of consciousness. They reveal particular states of consciousness. And so as Susan Smith put it, the process of the path is to transform flashes of illumination into a binding light. Or Richie Davidson wrote a book, *From States to Traits*, or something like that. The idea is the maturation, the stabilization, the integration of your experience into your life and into your daily activities.

And honestly, we always have to remember, dark retreat isn't the point. Deep extended meditation isn't the point. Psychedelics isn't the point. Life is the point. And so to bring any state experience, in this case specifically darkness, into life, integration is everything. And so the same principles that apply for integration also apply for preparation. Reinstating the conditions, microdosing, if we're using that languaging, microdosing, the conditions that brought about these experiences in the dark. And when you're in post-retreat, which could really be just like I mentioned, just wearing your mask every day for a while or whatever, especially when you come out.

We're going to be doing some studies on this, studies on not merely neuroplasticity, but what's called metaplastic, that out of any deep psychedelic experience, any deep extended meditation



experience, you are in a highly neuroplastic space. This is what's called opening critical learning periods. This is why there's so much potential for transformation when you become so plasticized, so open, so malleable coming out is how are you going to shape that malleability? How are you going to form your life? How are you going to form the trajectory that is your life? And so understanding this really speaks to the extraordinary opportunity that not only dark retreat, but any retreat, even psychedelics, presents to you.

And then working through meditation, through body work, through the practices I've mentioned with the mask. Again, there's so much to say about this. Community, working with like-minded practitioners who are engaging in this, the power of the we space, the power of sangha, super helpful when it comes to this. And what a surprise, consider going back in. Yes, you can have one great experience in the dark or not, but is one experience going to transform you for life? I mean, maybe for some people, it seems that's possible, but for me, this is why I keep going back every year. The unconscious mind is unfathomably deep. It's so profound. It's so deep. I go back in to continue to explore these dimensions. So I do a day-to-day with my home practice with my mask in my room, I go into retreat every year to continue the exploration, and then I continue to study, to learn, to talk with others of like mind. And hence integration has work within that capacity. More to say, but that's enough to get you going.

James Shaheen: Okay, Andrew Holecek, it's been a great pleasure. Thanks so much for joining us. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Total Eclipse of the Mind*, available now.

Thanks, Andrew.

Andrew Holecek: So much fun hanging with you. Thanks for the opportunity. Always really enjoy it.

James Shaheen: Yeah. Thanks a lot, Andrew.

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