



## An Introduction to Darkness Retreats

Anoula Sifonios

Tao Garden, Chiang Mai, Thailand

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Location: Tao Garden Health Spa & resort

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*Tao Garden : nature, architecture and art*

## History

Throughout history, different traditions have practiced spending time in full darkness. During prehistoric times, deep caves were used as places of initiation and contact with invisible realms. To this day, yogis and spiritual seekers have inhabited Himalayan caves with little or no light at all. Ayurvedic practitioners use darkness as a cure for the incurable, even placing patients in the dark for a few months if needed. This is known as “*kaya kalpa*.” After many steps of progressive initiations, if the practitioner seems ready for the experience, Tibetan Buddhism also uses darkness retreats. Taoism uses darkness as a tool for raising the energy towards the Divine. In Christianity, Saint John spoke of his mystical experiences in the darkness of his jail. Dionysius the Aeropagite says that divine darkness is “transluminous.”

Retreating into darkness is seen as a powerful means towards transformation for many cultures and spiritual traditions. It is a space for revelation on many levels—a way to connect to subtle realities and travel the path to enlightenment.

## Tao Garden

Taoist master Mantak Chia created a resort that aims at passing on the wisdom of the Tao. Nowadays in the world, you can find many individual retreat opportunities. Tao Garden however is the only location that provides accommodation and a practice hall for group retreats. The darkness retreat building has been designed for the purpose : simple architecture, complete darkness, ventilation, secure spaces. The ‘darkroom’ can accommodate about 40 people in single, double or triple rooms. Tao Garden also provides interesting facilities for before and after the darkness retreat, such as a magnificent swimming-pool, a fitness, a tennis court, a spa and different treatments and

massages. The Taoist clinic offers colon hydrotherapy, which helps coping with fasting and eliminating the toxins inside the intestine.



## Darkness

Darkness is an extraordinary teacher. We enter it like a womb, which is why we need a couple of days to be reborn again to the sunlight. The atmosphere in the darkness is very feminine. The blackness is comforting and enveloping. It allows you to be yourself without any reference to physical appearance. It protects your inner process so that you'll come out completely renewed. At the same time, darkness confronts you, showing your potential and your zones of opacity, where something needs to be let go of. Darkness is like a mirror. It can reflect your life, your subconscious mind, your deep identity, or it may show you parallel planes of existence.

Remaining in darkness means accessing an unshakable inner peace that comes from total relaxation of body and soul. This allows one's inner voice to come through, connecting you to higher vibrations, and making you one with the source of life.

## Health

Darkness is a place for healing. Deprived of the sun's photons, body chemistry changes. There is a deep change that takes place regarding health and vitality. First of all, melatonin increases substantially. This triggers a chain reaction, generating other regenerative molecules. During the first days, the practitioner tends to sleep a lot, and those suffering from nervous and physical exhaustion may recover. Melatonin stimulates the immune defense system. It also slows the development of certain tumors; it neutralizes free radicals (antioxidant and anti-ageing action). It facilitates the regeneration and replication of DNA.

At Tao Garden, blood tests are offered before and after the retreat, and they speak for themselves: the blood count changes after nine days. Fasting supports even more this cleansing process. Quite often, people come out of the darkness with their vitality increased tenfold.

## Subtle realms

Fasting makes you feel light and allows more subtle perceptions. Energy exercises are enhanced, because the *prāna* is no longer serving the digestive tract as it usually does.

The sense of sight is intensely stimulated. Because sight pulls us out to the external world, it causes alienation from the inside world. Darkness gives you access to a larger, richer self. Without perceiving the world through sight, you come naturally to the ground of being. The door is open for insight. Darkness may work on the psychic level, as well as energetically, spiritually and existentially. It is an incredible path to knowledge that may have therapeutic impacts too. Darkness offers flashes of truth and wisdom. It invites you to observe the functioning of thought and emotion. It brings light to internal psychological, karmic, or transgenerational knots and helps dissolve them. It wears out the ego-self and its conditionings in order to allow the encounter with the true Self. Darkness reorganizes the energy field while widening awareness. Thanks to the chemical changes in your brain caused by darkness, you will experience phenomena and visions while on this path. The pineal gland is activated and the brain generates alpha and theta waves. That means you access your subconscious mind and can grasp its content and reprogram it in powerful ways. These practices help heart coherence which enhances brain coherence. More often than not, all of this generates joy, gratitude, and intense affection. Meanwhile, chemistry, biology and electromagnetic frequencies take you to the other side of reality.

## The retreat

In 2025, you will be able to spend 12 days in darkness. Then, you will have two days for acclimatizing back to the light. We recommend you use that time to integrate your experiences before going back home. It is good to arrive latest by noon on April 20th, so that you become acquainted with the space before we turn off the lights, the same day around 11 PM. The first group gathering will take place at 5 PM. The retreat is scheduled until May 4th at 10 AM. Nevertheless, it is possible to leave the night before, but not before 9 PM. 24 hours are absolutely needed before you are ready to wander in the world again ! ☺

## Diet

Inside the darkroom, we minimize food intake, so that we feel open and available for the work that awaits us. On a vegan basis, you will receive vegetable and fruit juices, teas, raw food and grains. More informations will be given to you on that subject later. It will be necessary for you to reduce protein intake and animal products during one or two weeks before the retreat, so that you feel comfortable. Fasting or following a very light diet in the days before the retreat allows you to detoxify in preparation for entering the darkness.

Please inform us if you intend to fast on water only during the retreat.

## Practices

During the first six days, there will be different gatherings throughout the day, including talks, a few physical practices and mainly meditations focused on breathing and concentration. There will be deep relaxation practices (*nidrā*), which belong so well to darkness. We will focus on energy loops (*nāḍī*) and Light work. There will be music sessions, in order to feed our emotional bodies. As days go by, we'll enter into the unified field of darkness, made out of silence and energy. Group gatherings will slowly be reduced so that you may let things unfold and integrate individually. You may keep practicing your own path, whether it be *prāṇāyāma*, qì kong, tāi chi, yoga etc.

## No technology allowed in the dark room

Total blackness is an absolute necessity in this approach. Any dot of light is actually disturbing. That's why we ban any source of artificial light. There are neither computer screens, nor mobile phones nor Ipods working in the sacred space. It is the condition in order to allow everyone to wander freely in the dark room with open eyes. If you subscribe to the retreat, that means you agree to switch off these devices, including in the rooms. You will need to warn your dear ones that you won't be available throughout the retreat. In case of emergency, your family may contact the center. If you subscribe to the retreat you agree to collaborate to ensure a completely dark space without any disturbances.

Some MP3 players don't have a screen (such as Ipod shuffle) and if you wish to listen to music in your room, that's a lightfree solution.

## Silence

The darkness retreat will be supported by complete silence at all times. We know that exchanges in the rooms are not beneficial, as people tend to compare experiences, when they are so personal. We take care of the common silent space together, preserving each other's intimacy. Refraining from talking allows you to completely dive inside yourself. You will benefit from the darkness much more by remaining very still. The shared silence creates a powerful energy field that is uplifting. Individual interviews will take place from the second to the eighth day, so that you may share and enquire about what you are going through.

## Benefits

A darkness retreat offers different benefits for everyone, but the following are common experiences:

- Deep relaxation. If you lack sleep, you'll recover it.
- As we have distanced ourselves from the usual stimuli, the nervous system regenerates. We disconnect from our preoccupations and daily worries, calming the mind.
- Detoxification happens thanks to a proper diet and the chemical and hormonal changes. The body comes out of darkness purified.
- Getting deeply in touch with the senses and understanding them more fully.
- When you adjust to the darkness and are fully relaxed, you will discover a world of lights, colours and forms. Very often, the 'dark room' is not dark at all!
- Many reconnect to their own creativity.
- Advanced practitioners no longer lose consciousness while sleeping, instead entering a meditative sleep.
- People overcome their fear of darkness and even the fear of death.
- Inner clear vision or the 'third eye' becomes accessible. As a result, intuition develops alongside direct information and beyond thought.
- An understanding of invisible planes of existence may occur and therefore a change of paradigm concerning the so-called 'reality.'
- Vibratory frequency rises, leading to numerous energetic phenomena. These manifestations either balance vital energy (*chi* or *prāna*), or they are the vehicle for deep spiritual experiences.

- Teachings surge from within: liberation of the past, access to elevated feelings of grace, or encounters with beings living in other realms. Our practices support the emergence of such spontaneous revelations.

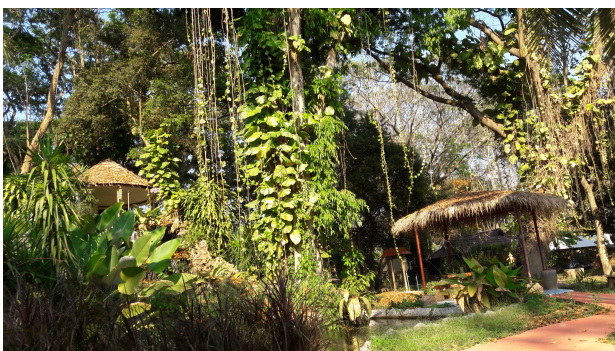
## The teacher

Since 1992, Anoula Sifonios has passionately studied modified states of awareness. For nearly three decades, she has sought to understand the larger reality, including metaphysics, energetics, and the intuitions of the ancient civilisations of Egypt, Sumer, Mesopotamia, Persia, and India. She studied their languages and history at the Free University of Brussels, receiving her MA in 2000. Since 1993, she's been travelling India and Asia. From 2004 to 2008, Malek Daouk and Geneviève Gillet trained her in yoga, and since 2006 she practices yoga-nidrâ with André Riehl. For nine years, she practiced Zen intensively with Adyashanti and Flint Sparks, among others. She met other teachers and teachings on her path, such as Vipassana or Gregory Kramer's Insight Dialogue, which are frequently reflected in the retreats. She works as a teacher, trainer, and therapist; gives lectures and organises initiatic journeys. Her aim is to understand the holistic nature of our humanity. Trained as a Sankritist, she comments on the ancient wisdom and teaches how to walk the path towards it. Her approach is practical, using the body to mould the mind. She loves to explain the knowledge through modern science too, especially in her darkness retreats. She aims at creating fertile ground for waking up to our deep nature and potential. Anoula is passionate about discovering the effects of darkness on body chemistry, health, and the inner path. It is in full darkness that her teachings come to their very essence. During retreats, she offers private interviews for those needing to share the process.

## The teachings

Anoula and her husband Johan offer teachings that aim to bring together the relative and absolute planes of existence; that lean into the light while taking care of the shadow; that balance the human and divine aspects of our lives. This transmission facilitates discrimination in thought and action. These teachings aim to open consciousness on all levels of existence. They offer a process of growth towards freedom and joy, where we learn to cope with emotions while unveiling metaphysical layers of our being.

Those who register will receive practical information and instructions in order to prepare for the event.



*A luxurious park*



*entrance to the dark room*