



## Introduction

The seeing commit a strange error. They believe that we know the world only through our eyes.

Jacques Lusseyran

I have engaged in deep inner work for most of my adult life, centered around fifty years of meditation. My journey has been a quest to discover who I am, and to find answers to the big questions: Why are we here? What's the meaning of life? What happens after we die? Part of this journey has included the traditional Tibetan Buddhist three-year retreat, where I had the luxury of engaging in dozens of meditations in the most supportive environment. To enhance my understanding of the mind, over the past few years I have systematically explored some of the most potent psychedelics on the planet.<sup>1</sup> East or West, ancient or modern, natural or technological, if there is a legitimate method for psychological and spiritual development, I have probably tried it. As rewarding as many of these approaches have been, nothing compares to my experience with dark retreat. It is easily the most transformative practice I have ever done.

For nearly thirty years, this unusual practice has delivered life-changing insights. It has illuminated dimensions of being beyond my imagination. It has birthed creativity at breathtaking new heights. It has shown me, repeatedly, what really matters. It has healed fractures in my mind and heart I didn't even know existed, and connected me to others, and to the planet, at the most profound levels. As I age and contemplate the ultimate dark retreat, it has become my main

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<sup>1</sup> My psychedelic journeys were never recreational, but always in the spirit of inner work. Almost all of them were guided by therapists, psychedelic researchers, or trained shamans. The medicines have included LSD, MDMA, Ayahuasca, psilocybin, IM ketamine, and 5 MEO-DMT.

preparation for this final journey, one that has removed all fear of death. And the return on investment (ROI) is insane. Just a few days in the dark pays dividends for months or even years.

Dark retreat is also the most challenging practice I have ever done. Nothing has asked more of me. Nothing has stretched me to such an extent. Nothing has commanded such levels of honesty. And absolutely nothing has demanded so much surrender. Every requirement and demand have been rewarded tenfold. It's almost like cheating. How can such brief durations in darkness deliver so many life-altering experiences (Chapter XXX)? Where do the transformations come from and why do they last (Chapter XXX)? Why is dark retreat the most experiential and revelatory practice for so many people (Chapter XXX)?

But this practice is not for everybody. Dark retreat is big medicine. This book is just as much about keeping people *out* as it is inviting them *in*. If you approach dark retreat as you would an ancient temple, you will be blessed. If you approach it as the next peak to conquer, or the latest exotic experience to check off your list, you will be reproached. When darkness isn't engaged with the respect it deserves, it spansks you. With the proper guidance and respect, this medicine can save you.

Before we go any further, pause for a moment. Take a deep breath. Now reflect on the deepest and most meaningful experience of your life. What do you do with your eyes? Where do you go? Almost everybody closes their eyes, or lowers their head, and goes within. In moments of silence or commemoration before a big public event – in moments of depth -- virtually everyone turns inside. To reflect is to literally “bend it back.” Dark retreat is possibly the most mind-bending thing you can do. Deep reflection, provided by the metaphysical mirror of darkness, turns the mind and heart back upon itself, allowing you to see what really matters. In *The Little Prince*, by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, a magical fox shares with the prince what he calls “my secret, a very simple secret,” which is, “it is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.” Close your eyes to open your heart. Then you will see.

### **Origin of this Book**

I have written nine previous books. Each one was a labor of love, requiring endless research, writing, and rewriting. The book you hold in your hands came almost fully written to

me at the end of a recent dark retreat. On one hand, it's the easiest book I've ever penned, with pages flowing out of me as quickly as I could put words to paper. The only work I had to do was insert supporting quotes.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, it's turned out to be the most difficult book. The difficulty is fourfold. First, how do you illuminate darkness without destroying it with light? It's not easy to speak of the unspeakable. As the Zen writer Alan Watts said, the task "is to say what cannot be said, to eff the ineffable." How do you shrink-wrap a practice of infinite depth into finite letters without eff-ing it up? At the deepest levels, dark retreat takes you all the way to nonduality, because darkness is the color of nonduality.<sup>3</sup> When you try to speak about nonduality using dualistic language, you'll always eff it up. Irony, paradox, and contradiction abound. But irony, paradox, and contradiction are just the way nonduality looks through a dualistic lens. Reality itself is not paradoxical, it's just not effable.

Secondly, dark retreat is a topsy-turvy journey probably unlike anything you've ever done. It's one reason the practice is drawing so much attention. It's just so unconventional and bizarre. Everything is turned inside out and upside down in dark retreat. Your daytime compass is worthless in the dark. Every traditional navigation system is left behind. Standard notions of directionality, accomplishment, and success no longer apply. How do I orient you in a journey where disorientation is core to the journey? How do I help you keep your bearings when getting lost is how you find what you're truly looking for?

Thirdly, darkness invites intimacy and exposure. Dark retreat strips you down to levels of nakedness you didn't even know were possible. To share experiences that are so exposed, so personal, and so vulnerable renders violence to the experience itself and can keep the experience from maturing into realization.<sup>4</sup> Why should I take that risk? And fourth, although there are a

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<sup>2</sup> When I discovered the work of historian and philosopher Peter Kingsley, I was startled at the resonance with my own experience in dark retreat. In his book, *In The Dark Places of Wisdom*, he writes about the ancient Greeks, and "people who justified their teachings on the basis of journeys they made into another world, who saw it as their job to bring back what they found and describe what they learned." (*In The Dark Places of Wisdom*, by Peter Kingsley, The Golden Sufi Center, Point Reyes, CA., 1999, p 104.)

<sup>3</sup> It's a subtle point, but proclaiming that darkness is the color of nonduality is ironically a dualistic assertion. It could imply that the only way to experience nonduality is in the dark. I will argue that darkness is uniquely qualified to deliver us to the nondual state by withdrawing us from the dualistic display, but the point is to then take that nondual realization back with us when we return to the world of light. In the pages ahead we'll explore why darkness delivers us so effectively into the space of "not two."

<sup>4</sup> Experience (*nyam* in Tibetan) always has a beginning and an end, like morning mist. Realization (*tokpa* in Tibetan) is stable, like a mountain. In techno-speak, integration and maturation is the journey of converting fleeting states into enduring traits. Sharing experiences inappropriately is one sure way of preventing this conversion. See Chapter XXX on How to Integrate.

few esoteric books on tantric-level dark retreat (described below), there is nothing of note that I can find for the general reader.<sup>5</sup> I therefore feel an obligation to represent this ancient practice as accurately as possible.

After my first formal dark retreat many years ago, I went to my teacher to share the experience and to seek his counsel. This esteemed Rinpoche (an honorific term meaning “Precious One”) offered his advice and then cautioned me, “You can talk about many things, but keep this practice to yourself.” For many years I have heeded his instruction. But this book burst into my mind with the clear message to write it. What to do? I believe it’s time to share, for the following reasons.

### **It's out there**

Dark retreat is rapidly emerging onto the self-improvement and spiritual scene. The toothpaste is out of the tube, and it’s not going back in. NFL superstar Aaron Rogers went into a dark retreat a few years ago and the press went ballistic about his strange adventure (which included an interview with former Fox News star Tucker Carlson). NBA icons Dwight Howard and Rudy Gobert, along with a host of other elite athletes, are posting social media clips about their experiences in dark retreat, inspiring a rush to see what the fuss is about. Movie stars, famous authors, artists, entrepreneurs, billionaires, and other celebrities are going into the dark and starting to talk. Dark retreat centers are popping up around the world. My friends who run some of these centers tell me they’re booked years in advance, with a waiting list of hundreds. A host of scientists in Europe and America are now studying dark retreat and darkness therapy.<sup>6</sup> The word is getting out and it is fantastic. Or is it?

Dark retreat is remarkably similar to psychedelics in its promise and peril. Numerous studies proclaim the benefits of psychedelics, along with the proportional hazards. Without the proper set and setting, psychedelics can do more harm than good. Bad trips are not uncommon.

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<sup>5</sup> The one notable exception is *Wonders of the Natural Mind*, a marvelous book by Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche. While this book is for the general reader, it focuses on the more esoteric practice of tantric level dark retreat.

<sup>6</sup> See the many studies of Peter Suedfeld around REST, or Restricted Environmental Stimulation Therapy, a relaxation technique using mostly floatation tanks that reduces sensory input and brings about deep states of relaxation. Numerous studies have been published around dark therapy, also known as “blackout” or “dark room therapy.” I’m working with several teams of neuroscientists to study formal dark retreat, but nothing has been published yet.

“Set” refers to mind set, your motivation in taking the substance and your aspirations for the journey; “setting” refers to the holding environment, whether it’s caring professionals in a psychedelic-assisted therapy session, or your drinking buddies wanting a new high. When psychedelics surged onto the scene fifty years ago the excitement stampeded over safety, and the medicines were banned. Decades of important research and beneficial use were lost due to impatience, misunderstanding, and lack of care.

Nearly every opportunity and obstacle in the world of psychedelics applies to dark retreat. With the proper set and setting, one good trip can electrify your life. Without the proper set up, one bad trip can electrocute.<sup>7</sup> It’s critical to understand that darkness itself never hurts anybody. It’s completely harmless. How you relate to the dark, and what it reflects, creates the (self-inflicted) damage. Darkness is a truth teller, just like a mirror. But dark retreat is not your normal mirror. It’s a magnifying mirror that shows you exactly what you’re made of at atomic levels, and who you truly are. Darkness is exacting. The question to reflect upon is how willing are you to be so exposed? How up close and personal do you want to get to yourself? How big a dose of *yourself* can you handle? Truth heals. But how much truth can you take?

Despite the burgeoning hype, with psychedelics or dark retreat, nothing is a panacea. I’m going to tout the outrageous benefits of this practice, but as with any method don’t put all your eggs in one basket. We so quickly project all our hopes onto new techniques only to have them dashed as our projections fade and we fall out of love and back into reality. Don’t turn to dark retreat to cure all your ails, or view it as the latest self-help method in the New Age supermarket, or the trendiest form of Goth meditation. There’s a reason the formal practice (versus informal home use) is historically guarded. It’s not because dark retreat admits you into a secret club, but because such an exotic practice tends to magnetize spiritual thrill-seekers, reckless psychonauts, and poorly motivated explorers that then suffer the consequences of such a flippant attitude.

When my teacher told me not to speak about dark retreat decades ago, times were different. Perhaps he felt that people weren’t ready. In 2002, only 7.5 percent of Americans meditated, in 2022 that number jumped to 18.3 percent.<sup>8</sup> Today it is estimated that about 35

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<sup>7</sup> But unlike psychedelics, you can end the trip with the flip of a light switch. We’ll explore the many parallels between psychedelics and dark retreat in Chapter XXX.

<sup>8</sup> <https://financesonline.com/meditation-statistics/> Accessed January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2025.

million people in America meditate, and anywhere from 200 – 500 million people worldwide.<sup>9</sup> Some 55 million people in the US practice yoga, and around 20 million people in the US alone have tried psychedelics. Since the pandemic, meditation has spread dramatically. The Global Wellness Institute found that since March of 2020, time spent meditating increased by 2900 percent worldwide.<sup>10</sup> Is it possible that authentic meditators, yogis, and plant medicine seekers are looking for the next step on their journey?

My aspiration in writing this book is to help you determine if this practice is right for you, and if dark retreat could be your next step. With some honest checklists, and a directory of indications and contraindications (Chapter XXX), you can evaluate if this practice has something to offer. If it does, this book provides everything you need to know to have a safe and fruitful journey. How do you prepare for dark retreat (Chapter XXX)? How do you integrate the insights (Chapter XXX)? What do you do when challenges arise (Chapter XXX)? How long should you stay in, when do you come out, and should you go back for more (Chapter XXX)? And what exactly do you do in there (Chapter XXX)? Starting with easy home practice, I will guide you step-by-step, at a pace that works for you, and show you how applicable this ancient practice is for our modern age.

### A return to source

The world is deeply mired in what the Hindu tradition calls the *Kali Yuga*, the “age of vice and misery,” and what Japanese Buddhism refers to as *mappo*, the Degenerate Age.<sup>11</sup> Fifty years ago, the meditation master Trungpa Rinpoche wrote, “This is the darkest hour of the dark ages. Disease, famine and warfare are raging like the fierce north wind.”<sup>12</sup> Political upheaval,

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<sup>9</sup> <https://mindworks.org/blog/how-many-people-meditate/#:~:text=In%20recent%20years%2C%20surveys%20have,the%20breath%20is%20very%20widespread>. Accessed January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2025.

<sup>10</sup> <https://choosemuse.com/blogs/news/meditation-trends-around-the-world#:~:text=around%20the%20world,-Worldwide%20Meditation%20Statistics,by%20%2C900%25%20around%20the%20world!> Accessed January 8, 2025.

<sup>11</sup> *Kali* is loosely translated as “dark,” so *Kali Yuga* is often translated as “Dark Age.” Unless we constantly separate lower-phase darkness from higher-phase darkness, as we’ll do in Chapter One, the term “Dark Age” could be confusing. For this reason, we’re going to stick with the term “*Kali Yuga*,” or degenerate age.

<sup>12</sup> *The Sādhana of Mahāmudrā*, by Chögyam Trungpa, Nalanda Translation Committee, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1990, p. 5.

ecological devastation, social injustice, cultural divides, gender inequality, poverty, homelessness, and endless conflict are just a few of the many crises that comprise our present *meta-crisis*. Many reasons are given for this meta-crisis (also called the polycrisis, systemic crisis, or permacrisis), with an equal number of suggested solutions. A broad-spectrum approach is needed to address broad-spectrum problems.

I will argue that the multitudinous display of problems can be reduced to fundamental principles and addressed by a return to our origins.<sup>13</sup> Dark retreat delivers us to the reduction base of innate wholeness, and helps us understand what's really going on, not merely within ourselves, but within the world at large (Chapter XXX). It may seem initially facile, and dismissive of the complexity of the meta-crisis, but societies are comprised of individuals, and every individual shares the same fundamental principles of being. It's not a tired cliché, but a ceaseless proclamation of the truth: despite our superficial differences, at the ground of being we're essentially the same. But in this light-polluted and highly distracted age, we lose our shared essence in the complex display of modernity. We forget.

The multiplicity effectively obscures the underlying unity. And multiplicity arises in broad daylight, when our most superficial and dualistic sense of sight splinters the world, dominates our perception, and then seduces us out and away from ourselves. If left unchecked, outside light turns into a thermonuclear weapon of mass distraction. With the advent of artificial light, the damage is only getting worse. We've ironically lost our way with too much light. By going underground, dark retreat returns us to our common base, removes the divisive splinters, and initiates the healing. It heals because it helps us remember

Satellite data has revealed that artificial light is spreading and growing brighter, producing more light pollution and a "widespread loss of the night."<sup>14</sup> Because of electric light,

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<sup>13</sup> Integral Theory is one of the most comprehensive approaches to addressing the complexity of our current age. The five paths of waking up, growing up, cleaning up, showing up, and opening up explore this complexity in detail. I am acutely aware of what integral theorist Ken Wilber calls the *pre-trans fallacy*, and the difference between *aduality* (which expresses pre-personal fusion) and *nonduality* (which expresses trans-personal union). I leave it up to the integrally informed reader to decide for themselves if my argument slips into a pre-trans conflation. For more on the five paths, see *Finding Radical Wholeness: The Integral Path to Unity, Growth, and Delight* by Ken Wilber; for more on the pre-trans fallacy, see *Eye to Eye: The Quest for the New Paradigm*, p 215-261, by Ken Wilber. Also see the upcoming section, Glorious Deconstruction, in Chapter Six for more.

<sup>14</sup> "Artificially Lit Surface of Earth at Night Increasing in Radiance and Extent," by Christopher C.M. Kyba, et al, in *Science Advances*, 22 Nov 2017, Vol 3. No 11. [advances.sciencemag.org/content/3/11/e1701528/tab-figures-Data](https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/3/11/e1701528/tab-figures-Data) accessed November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017. Dark Sky International "restores the nighttime environment

outdoor illumination has grown three to six percent annually in the second half of the twentieth century. “While this has benefited productivity and safety, it has come with a dark side. The night is no longer dark enough.”<sup>15</sup> We’re suffering from a massive darkness deficit disorder. Franz Hölker, one of the authors of a recent study, warns, “From an evolutionary perspective, now, artificial light is a very new stressor. The problem is that light has been introduced in places, times and intensities at which it does not naturally occur, and many organisms have had no chance to adapt to this new stressor.”<sup>16</sup> It has devastating implications for the environment, for human health, and most importantly for us, psychological and spiritual (psychospiritual) evolution. Darkness deficit disorder leads to an introspective deficit disorder. It’s a disorder because we think what we’re looking for is outside in the light, when it’s actually to be found in the darkness within.

Because light in general, and artificial light in particular, tends to pull us away from ourselves, we’ve lost contact with who we really are. We’re living on the surface of ourselves, then wondering why something is missing. We’re equally out of touch with this sacred earth and can no longer truly feel each other. As earth is losing its darkness we are losing our way. Darkness deficit disorder is a disorder of depth. So much of the psychospiritual path is associated with light and height. We clamor for peak experiences and strive for the light. But if we’re not careful, this leads to high-altitude sickness and serious sunburn. I’m not dismissing the value of light, nor the importance of lofty achievement, but merely pointing out the imbalance of the Kali Yuga and the need for darkness and depth. For every we step we take up and out, we need to take another step down and in. Otherwise, we get dizzy and disoriented with the height and blinded by the light.

When I spend time in the dark, it is to recover the night and to restore my sight. In dark retreat, with absolutely nothing to seduce me out, with no trace of light pollution, I’m drawn deeply within and see things never seen before. I find what I’m truly looking for, and what really matters. These retreats reestablish the natural curfew of the night and cure the darkness deficit disorder. They keep me from getting into discursive trouble, the inevitable turmoil that

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and protects communities from the harmful effects of light pollution through outreach, advocacy, and conservation.” See <https://darksky.org/> for more.

<sup>15</sup> “Artificial lights are eating away at dark nights – and that’s not a good thing,” by Amina Kahn, *Los Angeles Times*, November 22, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

accompanies an insatiably outward-bound mind. Barbara Brown Taylor, author of the best-selling book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, writes, “I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light.”<sup>17</sup> Perhaps there’s a symbolic reason we have two eyes. Keep one eye on the dark, and you’ll never lose sight of your depth.

### Lunar spirituality

In this Degenerate Age, humanity has been seduced away from the center of itself and as far away as possible from the divine. This divinity lies at the core of our being, which is pitch black.<sup>18</sup> The poet Christopher Dewdney writes, “It is always night inside the body.” Sunlight only penetrates a few millimeters past the skin, beyond that is absolute darkness. “The perpetual night of the body is where each of us began, so we are truly children of the physical night.”<sup>19</sup> In that deep silence and stillness, in the darkness at the center of ourselves, we will find the exalted. But silence and stillness, held under the cover of darkness, scare us. So we jump out of the bed of darkness and search outside for our version of the divine, misplacing ourselves in the light. In countless ways we are solar powered beings, light eaters, and ours is a solar spirituality.

Mine is a lunar spirituality. I worship the night and am consumed by it. “The night is our window on the Infinite,” writes the naturalist Chet Raymo. I have spent my life exploring the infinity within, the origins of life, the beginning of consciousness, the basis of all. And this always leads me back to the dark. In Greek mythology and the book of Genesis, darkness precedes light. In Hinduism, the darkness of dreamless sleep is called “causal consciousness,” which means that both dreaming and waking consciousness arise from it. The flash of the Big Bang arose from a womb of primordial darkness. Seeds germinate in the dark. I was probably conceived in the dark, spent nine months bathed in it, and was then born from it.

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<sup>17</sup> *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, by Barbara Brown Taylor, Canterbury Press, Norwich, Norfolk, 2015, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Listen to the scientist John Wren Lewis talk about his near-death experience, and how he found God in deep and dazzling darkness. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDHsi-HOiQU>

<sup>19</sup> *Acquainted with the Night; Excursions Through the World After Dark*, by Christopher Dewdney, Bloomsbury, New York, NY., 2004, p. 138.

You and I are children of darkness. Literally and allegorically. Every morning, we arise from darkness, and every night we return to it. Every flash of insight, or flicker of thought, arises from the background darkness of the mind and returns to it, like a campfire spark melting into the nighttime sky. One day our bodies will melt back into the dark. Whether we like it or not, darkness is our primal home. It behooves us to become familiar with it.

### Sūtra vs tantra dark retreat

Dark retreat comes in two forms, sūtra and tantra.<sup>20</sup> The Sanskrit word *sūtra* means “discourse, sermon, or scripture,” and refers to exoteric teachings delivered in a public setting. Sūtra-level dark retreat is for anyone. This is an accessible practice that you can do at home, or in formal retreat settings, and it is our main focus in this book.

Tantra-level dark retreat, explored in a future volume, is a different matter. This is prescription strength medicine that must be prescribed by an authentic teacher, then used as directed by a genuine student. When my teacher admonished me not to speak about dark retreat, he was referring to this form of practice. *Tantra* means “weave, continuum” but is notoriously difficult to define, which is one reason it can be readily distorted into domains like “tantric sex” or “tantric speed dating” (no kidding). For our purposes, tantra refers to esoteric teachings, delivered in a private setting, for a select group of prepared individuals. The tantras themselves are intentionally opaque, or self-secret. Without a commentary, a knowledgeable guide, and previous experience in the sūtras, the tantras are impenetrable.<sup>21</sup> It’s like trying to understand advanced calculus without having studied basic math.

Tantra dark retreat transcends but includes sūtra dark practice. It involves retreats of up to 49 days, engages methods designed to elicit a particular set of experiences, and according to Tibetan Buddhism is the ultimate preparation for death. This does not mean that sūtra-level practice isn’t as transformative as its tantric counterpart. As we’ll see, sūtra-level practice has tremendous benefits, and without the risks of tantra (Chapter XXX). To give you a sense of how

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<sup>20</sup> This is my own classification, you will not find this articulation in traditional texts. Virtually every traditional text is about tantra-level dark retreat. I consider sūtra-level dark retreats to be anywhere from one to five days, and tantra-level to be anywhere from five days to a month or more.

<sup>21</sup> To get a sense of the challenges in understanding a tantric text, try reading *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. This book is a user-friendly adaptation of aspects of the Guhyagarbha Tantra, but remains incomprehensible to most readers.

far dark retreat can go, I'm going to use the classification of tantra dark retreat to discuss the deeper aspects of this practice. These interjections are a form of "trickle-down spirituality," where a lofty teaching is briefly engaged to show you what is possible, and to elevate subordinate levels of material.

For purposes of contradistinction, sūtra dark retreat is more psychological in nature and deals with self-improvement; tantra dark retreat is more spiritual in nature and deals with self-transcendence. While these distinctions are helpful, in the end it's all fuzzy. You can have full-blown tantric level experiences in a sūtra retreat and, conversely, harvest mostly sūtra-level insights in a tantric retreat. Like everything in the dark, the boundaries break down and these levels blend into each other.<sup>22</sup> As we go further into this book we'll drop deeper into tantric levels of dark retreat, mirroring the experience of dedicated dark trekkers. Many of these deeper insights came to me after a number of dark retreats. They are inserted to give you a sense of just how much is possible if you stick with this practice.

Dark retreat is not about darkness. It's about you. It's about depth. It's about getting to know yourself, without distraction, at the deepest possible levels. If you don't know who you are, how can you possibly know what you really want? Dark retreat reveals the extents you go to in order to avoid yourself, and how that avoidance strategy causes all your suffering. Go into the dark to find yourself, to find what you truly want, and to end suffering. It's a marvelous practice of "lost and found." What is lost in the light can be found in the dark.

### How to read this book

This book will progress, like your time in darkness itself, from relatively accessible introductory material into progressively deeper topics. If you don't want to go this deep, just skim or skip the deeper sections. As with darkness altogether, do what feels right for you. You may find that coming back to the deeper dives in a later reading makes more sense, especially if

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<sup>22</sup> Sūtra vs. tantra dark retreat (called *yangti nagpo*, or "black quintessence," in Tibetan Buddhism) is akin to the difference between spelunking and speleology. Spelunking is the amateur exploration of caves or going underground as a parttime hobby. I've gone spelunking in some truly spectacular caves, and derived great benefit. Speleology is the scientific study of caves, exploring their physical properties, structure, history, composition, ecology, and the processes by which they form and change. I can imagine spiritual thrill-seekers and impatient explorers wanting to rush into the deeper tantric end of the cave, but without the proper motivation, preparation, and supervision, you can get in over your head. Or in this case, under it.

you have the chance to explore dark practice and get a feel for it. Keep in mind that dark retreat is not amenable to skimming. It's a disservice to the practice to keep things lite. Dropping into the depths should be done slowly. Just like scuba diving, you don't want to go down too fast. Take your time, get used to the gravity of the material and the density of these waters, and you'll enjoy the plunge. Otherwise, you're likely to dart back up to the surface, not unlike the desire to head for the door when things get heavy in the dark.

The first seven chapters create the view that supports dark retreat. For those who are anxious to get going, the nuts-and-bolts of dark practice are introduced in Chapter XXX (Getting Started). Copious endnotes accompany the text and could be read after you go through the book, or upon a second reading. My favorite books are the ones that give me pause, or stop my mind altogether. Books where I need to take a breath and feel into what's being said. When I enter darkness I have to slow down, or come to a full stop, to get my bearings. Take your steps in this journey mindfully, respectfully, even reverentially, and darkness will gradually reveal its secrets.