

# Social Isolation as a Mindfulness Retreat



**By Gayle Van Gils**

“Raw, vulnerable, ungrounded, and exposed” – these are feelings I have been having since working alone in social isolation. In coaching conversations with clients and masterclasses with colleagues, I have been hearing these same words over and over. They made me reflect on the interesting fact that these feelings are so similar to the condition that I find myself in several days into an immersive meditation retreat. In fact, much of my personal experience of social distancing has replicated the effect of intensive meditation. Now, I understand my personal experience may be different than yours. For me, it is worth exploring the similarities and seeing what we might learn from looking at this situation in which we find ourselves, from that viewpoint.

Below I have broken down the retreat/self-isolation experience into stages.

## **Entering into retreat**

Arriving at a retreat center, we are leaving home behind and all of its familiar landmarks. In the current situation, by being bound at home, we ironically are living among all of our familiar landmarks, but for most of us, they are the landmarks of family and leisure activities, not the usual environment of work and accomplishment in the professional sphere. This can be disorienting and leave us ungrounded.

## **Spending time in silence**

The echo of my own voice becomes louder and louder the quieter that I get in retreat! While we may not be exactly quiet in our home isolation, with no physical connection to colleagues, my voice in the headset seems loud and a bit off, and I wonder if the other person is sensing that slight echo that I am hearing.

Self-criticism seems to thrive in both of these self-contained situations leaving me feeling raw and vulnerable. New awareness of the harshness of my voice to myself and the gradual process of accepting and befriending myself is for me a major gift of retreat.

## **Creating a schedule**

On most retreats there is a very clear schedule; time to practice meditation, time to study, time to eat, etc. Since this new structure is quite different from the hectic daily pace of pre-retreat life, it can be disorienting until we establish a rhythm. As professionals, we may have had much discretion with our time, but our schedule was also dictated by the people and situations around us. It had its own organic pacing.

Now at home, we have new challenges and different choices – do we get out of our pajamas? Do we sleep in and work later? How do we factor in helping our children with school work? The external constraints have changed, and that requires that we take responsibility to follow a discipline that is not as familiar and therefore causing us to feel ungrounded. The unfamiliarity may be yet another source of feeling that we are at fault, and not doing something quite right.

## **Settling into the new routine**

If we stay in retreat long enough, our days of meditation, contemplation, reading, and walking in nature do take on a melody and rhythm that feels different, good, and strangely natural. It feels like we are becoming more in tune with our authentic self and with whatever purpose lies in being aligned with that truth. As the days have stretched into weeks of social isolation, the openness and vulnerability might give us that same possibility to listen to our inner self and align with what is important in a time of uncertainty. Building mindfulness meditation or a journaling practice into our day affords us access to messages of inner wisdom that are always available and waiting to be heard, even when not on retreat.

## **Noticing Possibilities**

On retreat, when I reread dharma books from a space of greater openness and awareness, I am amazed at the insights I receive. It feels like the first time I have read these words that I may have read 100 times before. From our place of vulnerability in social isolation, we may have reached out to reconnect with family, friends, and even more distant colleagues. We may feel a connection to each other and the land, water, and air that we lost when we were so busy with our previous routines and habits. In the midst of connecting with others, we possibly have created new alliances and collaborations. Or we may have realized that with the year ahead looking very different than the years just past, that now is the time to take a chance on doing the thing that we put off forever – such as writing a book or studying a new skill. So much is possible when we let go of old habits. Space and possibility literally open up for us.

## Leaving Retreat

Leaving a solo retreat can be as disorienting as the entry. We have become used to the solitude, the quiet, and the spaciousness of our own being. We have slowed down and more of our natural kindness and compassion has revealed itself. The challenge is to take that back with us into our lives and re-engage without losing the curiosity and freshness that we now embody.

As our days of strict social isolation begin to be dissolved, our opportunity is to create a “new normal” that, in a similar way, brings the best of our realizations with us into whatever we do. Paramount is bringing with us the practice of showing kindness to whatever arose in our own mind; that is a genuine gift of retreat. We make friends with the many voices in our heads, especially our inner critic, and as we experience that same critic in social isolation we have been given the same chance to befriend ourselves. We can extend that empathy into our relationships with family, friends, and colleagues when we meet up again.

From the initial days of retreat/social isolation, our experience of vulnerability and uncertainty has the possibility to expand into opportunity. With awareness, shifting routines and abandoning old habits become more possible. Whether that situation is by choice on retreat, or by necessity because of a pandemic, both situations provide the opportunity to experience our hearts and minds in a deeper and more personal way. Taking this opportunity to be kind to ourselves as we stumble in the mix of novel experiences and anxiety about loss and illness, we can emerge from this pandemic with appreciation and resilience. This renewed self-compassion can be the greatest gift of a retreat and/ or our social isolation experience.

*Gayle Van Gils is a senior mindfulness teacher and meditation practitioner and has spent many weeks and months in silent retreat. As the founder of [Transform Your Culture](#), Gayle brings the teachings of Emotional Intelligence, compassion and values alignment to leaders and entrepreneurs wishing to uplift and energize their business's culture. Gayle is a certified [Search Inside Yourself](#) instructor, a meta-coach for the [Goleman EI](#) organization, a popular meditation teacher on the app [Simple Habit](#), and the author of the award winning book, [Happier at Work: The Power of Love to Transform the Workplace](#).*