

Diary of a Silent Retreat

If you've already chucked out all your new year's resolutions, cutting the incessant busy babble from your life can provide deeper awareness – silence truly is golden! Here's a life coach's diary-style account of her silent retreat

I, Kate, of sound body and mind, willingly engage in a three-day silent retreat. I feel a surge of energy flood into my veins as I wholeheartedly commit to *me*.

DAY 1

I've completed 10 days of metabolism detoxification. I have a newfound respect for my body as I watch it melt away and feel inspired to eat well from now on to invest in higher energy levels.

Yesterday when I reminded friends and family I wasn't going to be available on SMS, email, phone or Facebook for three days, it was like prying myself out of the Whomping Willow's clutches in the Harry Potter books. Managing other people's responses and fears about what silence means has been challenging and enlightening.

Last night I was full of anticipation for my total "time out", but anxiety kept sweeping over me. I wanted to do this – yet intriguingly, sabotage is rearing its head before I start. Don't you love

human nature?

5am: My brain's feeling the shift, knowing I'm going deep within. I decide to launch myself outside for a walk.

I have a ham sandwich in the fridge, so I decide to give it to a hungry soul. Fifty metres from my gate, I look up, see hungry eyes and automatically blurt out: "Are you hungry, dude?" It takes 10 seconds to dawn on me: the day has just begun and I can't shut up! Maybe I shouldn't venture out... at least I had the foresight to stock my fridge. Tick.

6am: I eat breakfast mindfully and climb back into bed for another sleep.

10am: I feel as if I've been hit over the head – why am I doing this?

5.35pm: Spend the day in and out of slumber. Choose insight cards for focus and direction. The emerging themes remind me that I'm doing what's right for me right now. I sleep more, soak up cloudy sunshine, read, cut fresh flowers

10 TIPS FOR SILENT RETREATING

- Choose three days for the most benefit.
- Complete outstanding tasks so you can focus on *being*.
- Let family and friends know you *won't* be available.
- If you live with others, contemplate staying elsewhere.
- Write a journal to record your insights.
- Keep a deep sense of humour.
- Understand that you may get really tired.
- Pre-buy food so you don't engage in shopping.
- Remember, it's only three days!
- Again, keep a sense of humour!

and have another nap. This silence needs sleep!

DAY 2

5.20am: I awake from the deepest slumber without a cellphone. It's disorientating. I venture out for my power walk – and, blow me down, 25m from my home I yell “Morning!” to a grey dog pushing its face through the fence. What's my problem? Lack of awareness, lazy, acting out of habit?

Am I really in silent retreat, even though I'm not faring so well? Can I let myself off the hook, focus on the beauty of my intention and use everything as insight when I return from the underworld?

I've energetically cleared out all my music, books and photos, read motivational writings and had breakfast – and it's 10.58am. I feel suspended in the long hours of the day. But my creativity's kicking in as downtime brings the gifts of inspiration and imagination. It feels great to break the relentless cycle of a “fast 'n furious” lifestyle.

4pm: Almost halfway...

5.54pm: I have a sudden burst of energy to create goals. I start dreaming of things to be, do and have, and write actions in my diary. Dinner's wolfed down and I wish darkness would fall so I can lull myself into dreaming silence. Tomorrow is the last day of my silence. The following day, my sweetheart returns from holiday – I feel myself leaving the now and anticipating where we might go for dinner, fantasising about champagne to end this wonderful healing time. But wait – I'm here, in my solitude, in my “me”. I choose

once again to be present.

6pm: Decide to go for a walking meditation – anticipating not talking to a leaf!

6.16pm: Whoop! This short stroll was a miracle. I gave myself better odds by turning away from the village bustle, but I was accosted by someone asking for money. I kept walking and smiled. I bring this insight back into the verbal world – if I don't have anything of value to say, I don't need to say it. I'm making progress.

8.05pm: Just got the fright of my silent life – I switched on my phone purely to turn the reminder alarms off, except I forgot to turn it off. I was lying in bed when my cellphone rang. I actually jumped from shock. I hated the sound of it. My solar plexus was pounding and adrenaline pumping. Not sure I want to come out of silence any more.

DAY 3

Doing my little victory dance after the morning walk. No babblings – even managed to simply wave at ADT guards. I'm finally soaking up all insights silence offers.

9am: The gardener arrives unexpectedly. Thank heavens I'm not silently dancing naked. I'm so shocked that I blurt out “Hello!” The daily horror of Kate – why can't I just shut it? I'm desperately attempting to complete this with grace.

1pm: My energy levels are rapidly rising, but the reality that tomorrow I can consume what I please *and* talk is starting to play tricks with my mind. Creamy pesto pasta and champagne are beckoning. How early can I go to bed so that

tomorrow arrives quickly?

DONE AND DUSTED

5am: My coming-out party – how ironic! Now that I can interact fully with the world, I'm yearning for an afternoon nap and a silent walk to retreat to “me”.

Several things have come to light for me over the past three days. As an entrepreneur, I often allow guilt to prevent me from taking insightful downtime. While I gift myself with regular pockets of weekly “me” time in the form of yoga, walks, cocktails with friends, etc, it's not enough for real contemplation. Spending these uninterrupted three days with just myself and my thoughts took on a different depth of meaning. I love the way time slowed down and I got to engage completely with both my demons and my delights. I battled with my “self-talk” and incessant need to engage, and I loved the creativity that emerged from the solitude. I'm painfully aware of the joy that interacting with others brings me, yet – simultaneously – how I can fill space up with mindless yacking. By taking a step back, I feel better equipped to face the rest of the year with strength. I feel empowered knowing I've been at one with me. **D**

USEFUL CONTACTS

To experience a silent retreat at a Buddhist centre, contact:

- The Nan Hua Buddhist Temple, Bronkhorstspruit. Visit: www.nanhua.co.za.
- The Buddhist Retreat Centre, Ixopo, KZN. Visit: www.brcixopo.co.za.
- The Tushita Kadampa Buddhist Centre, Cape Town. Visit: www.meditateincapetown.org.