



ROSIE SARAGA

# Not Another Word

GILLIAN KENDALL

When I signed up for a “silent *vipassanā* yoga and meditation retreat” at the Esalen Institute, I didn’t even know what the word *vipassanā* meant, but I wasn’t worried about it. I planned to use the week as a personal sabbatical. I’d get up at sunrise and bathe in the hot tubs overlooking the Pacific, then drift into the morning sessions for a bit of yoga or meditation, and spend afternoons writing in the loft of the big blue art barn. After dinner I’d check e-mail, soak again in the hot tubs, and read an Anne Tyler novel and Carl Jung’s *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Because it was a silent retreat, the whole time — five days — I wouldn’t have to talk to anyone.

Generally I talk a lot. Once before, during a writing retreat, I’d refrained from speaking for a day, and I’d found it liberating. But that had been only twenty-four hours, and friends who had taken longer silent retreats had told me the experience could be like a bad acid trip. So I was apprehensive, but still I looked forward to shutting up for a while.

I also, it turned out, didn’t know the meaning of the word *silence*. On Sunday evening the 125 retreat participants gathered in the circus-tent-like Dance Dome to hear the retreat leaders introduce the week ahead. Phillip Moffitt, who taught meditation at a place called “Spirit Rock,” seemed to be the head Buddhist. He had a large, square face with creases around his mouth and eyes. In a gentle voice he asked us to honor and be grateful for whatever had brought us to this retreat, and then to forget about it.

Phillip explained that “social silence” entailed not only no talking, but also no deliberate body language, especially no eye contact. “Sometimes we can go around hungry for folks to look at us.” To demonstrate he widened his eyes and mimed gazing into other people’s faces. We were to avoid doing that. “But if you happen to meet someone’s eyes as you pass through a door or something, that’s OK,” Phillip said. “Just let it happen, and let go of it.”

The thought that anyone might be disturbed by fleeting eye contact amused me, and I giggled. No one else did, and my little laugh seemed loud and inappropriate.

Phillip went on to explain that “social silence” excluded sexual activity. I wondered if that included masturbation, but I didn’t want to raise that question in front of 125 nongiggling Buddhist strangers.

The four teachers and their assistants, we learned, would talk if we approached them. Also, every other day we could meet briefly in small groups with one teacher, and during that time we’d be allowed to ask questions.

Phillip added that we could put away “all those great books” we’d brought in our suitcases, because silence included not reading. Ouch! I’d barely started the Anne Tyler. But I swallowed my objection, deciding that I’d keep the novel for the plane trip home.

And then Phillip mentioned that silence excluded writing.

The lights dimmed, and the Dance Dome walls closed in around my head, where a riot had started. A booing, spitting, angry mob of storytellers was massing, ready to storm the podium. Off with his Buddhist head!

As soon as Phillip invited questions, my hand shot into the air. He chose another person, who anxiously asked what I wanted to know: “What about personal writing, like in a journal?”

I leaned forward to hear better as another teacher took the question, and, disobeying the injunction we’d just heard, I gazed hard, willing him to make eye contact. A thin, dark-haired man named Mark Coleman unfolded himself from the lotus position, sighed thoughtfully, and said, in a disarming Irish accent, that writing can work in two ways: it can distract us from our practice, or it can deepen it. He implied that the latter was rare, and he suggested that we limit ourselves to “minimal writing, perhaps haiku journaling.”

In the next twenty-four hours I would write about 150 haiku.

Gillian Kendall  
worst meditator in the room  
worst at yoga, too!

At the end of the opening session, someone struck a chime to signal that we were entering into silence, and we filed out, heads lowered, eyes at forty-five degrees. I marched to my room, snapped on the light, sprawled across my bed, and wrote.

Over the next two days I kept writing. In between the morning meditation and yoga sessions — and sometimes even during them — I made notes in my journal:

In the packed meditation hall, our teacher said, in his soft, lovely way, that some of us might be feeling “a bit cozy,” but he encouraged us to “notice all the space in the room.” I thought he meant the space over our heads, because there was extremely little space in between our bodies. Our yoga mats were overlapping.

“We are mostly space,” he went on serenely, and I laughed: our teacher was trying to make up for the overfilled classroom by pointing out space on a cellular level.

I wrote more while skipping the afternoon sessions, and I took notes during the few evening “dharma talks” that I made it to. I wasn’t obnoxious about it. I didn’t flip through pages in my notebook, sigh, and scribble ostentatiously. But I wrote.

This retreat is offering me everything I never wanted: five days of silence and no one to talk to. My nonself is having a ball!

The teacher says that if I hear a noise during meditation, I am not to attend to the source. I do not have to tell myself the story of the noise. Yet my mind does little else than make up stories about what I hear, see, or feel. “Be curious” is a rule of good writing. Clearly, it’s OK to be curious and notice the curiosity, but I should let go of the impulse to satisfy the curiosity.

Other impulses I am “letting go of” (at my own very slow pace) include speaking, making eye contact, having nonverbal communication, using e-mail, texting, reading, surfing the Internet, chatting online, and, get this, writing.

On Monday morning I needed something from the Esalen office. I arrived about five minutes before it opened, and so, as my teachers would say, I “got to experience” waiting. Instead of merely experiencing it, though, I wrote:

The office is closed  
The mountain is green, not brown  
I wait on both feet

The image of waiting “on both feet” expressed something about the patience I was learning and my awareness of my body and breath. I posted my haiku anonymously on the door of the office. A day later it was gone, and I felt annoyed. I’d wanted other people to read it and thought its removal constituted censorship.

At lunchtime on Monday, about sixteen hours into the silence, I was standing (on both feet) near the serving line, holding a bowl and pondering whether to try the miso soup. As I gazed into the vat — smelling its savory steam, feeling my hunger, noticing my mind’s question about the soup — someone touched my arm. Startled, I looked up into a human face. There was a long moment of astonishing eye contact before I recognized my dear friend Michele. I’d forgotten she’d offered to visit Esalen and “break silence” with me. I was ecstatic to see her: I had someone to talk to.

After lunch, we found a shady corner of the garden where our conversation would not disturb anyone. When one of Esalen’s staff saw us talking, I stage-whispered, “This is my friend; she’s only here for an hour.” The woman smiled and said, “I won’t tell.”

It was exciting to exchange words and eye contact. Just hearing about Michele’s morning was fascinating, like the best story I’d ever heard. When she glanced away, I asked her to look back at me.

As we said goodbye, Michele told me that when she’d seen me in my silent reverie at the soup bar, looking into my eyes had been “like looking into the void.” She made her face blank, lowered her eyelids, and imitated my flat, internally focused gaze. It was the funniest thing I’d ever seen. I made her do it again until I laughed so hard I could barely stand up. Later in the week, starved of human contact and social stimulation, I would repeatedly rouse myself to insane laughter by looking into a mirror and doing Michele’s impression of me in my spaced-out, silent state.

On Monday afternoon nine other participants and I met with Phillip Moffitt. We all sat in silence for a while, and then someone asked, “What’s the difference between consciousness and mindfulness?”

Phillip chuckled and murmured, “That’s a good question.” He went on to explain about how each one both was and was not the other, blah, blah. I knew a better answer and wanted to wave my hand in the air to announce it. Instead, I wrote it down:

Consciousness happens unless you are sleeping, in a coma, or dead. It begins at birth and ends at death. Mindfulness is a state that happens when you come to expensive retreats and struggle not to be attached to the conscious mind, allowing thoughts, feelings, lumbar pain, and venomous insects to pass by and through you.

Next someone asked what to do if a mantra came to mind during mindfulness meditation: should she let go of the mantra or focus on it? Phillip said she should either follow the mantra or let it go, but not do both — which seemed obvious to me. I refrained from suggesting that she fight the mantra off with sexual fantasies.

On Tuesday at 6 A.M. I skipped the scheduled “gratitude meditations” and took a walk down to the baths. A Buddhist teaching says, “A truly happy person can do no harm.” I didn’t think I was harming myself by missing the morning session: I was truly, harmlessly happy having my *own* session, soaking naked in my favorite hot tub, in my favorite place in the world, at my favorite time of day. The rising sun was still hidden behind the mountains, the sea was matte green and opaque, and no one else was around. It wasn’t hard to be in the moment.

At a workshop a few years before, when the instructor had asked us to create personal mantras in time with our breathing, mine had come to me instantly: “In the tubs, at Esalen.” I breathed in for the first three syllables, out for the last four.

Now, in the tubs, at Esalen, my mantra came into my mind, and, like the woman who’d questioned Phillip, I didn’t know whether I should hold on to it or let it go. Would focusing on the mantra “In the tubs, at Esalen” take me away from the moment of actually being in the tubs, at Esalen?

I was writing all this down. As I wrote, I flicked an ant off my arm — mindlessly. Then I got to notice my guilt and shame, because we’d been asked not to intentionally harm any living thing, including insects, during our retreat. We hadn’t actually signed an agreement, but I felt committed to honor the request.

I searched to see where I might have flicked the ant, but I couldn’t find it. Should I pray for its well-being? Or would praying constitute a further distraction from the moment?

*(end of excerpt)*