

a mindful meditation vacation

Learn the art of doing nothing.

By **Sophia V. Schweitzer**

My car bumped its way over an unpaved road. Ten yards from the entrance, I stopped. It was not too late to turn around.

The Fourth of July weekend was rapidly approaching and there were better ways to spend my vacation than with what lay ahead.

Under stress and duress, I had signed up for a 10-day silent insight-meditation retreat. It seemed that I had long been searching for a moment of peace. I was hoping the retreat could provide a doorway. So I started the car again and soon found myself with about 20 other people who looked as apprehensive as I felt.

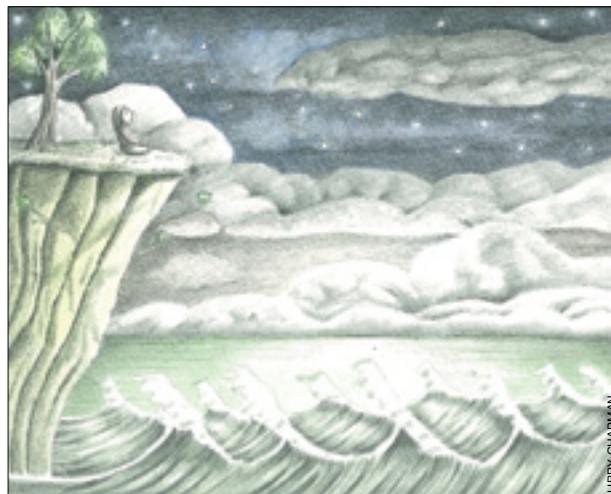
I spent the next 10 days on a gorgeous ocean-front property on Hawai'i Island. Jungle gulches bordered open grasslands, where shaded pathways meandered like ribbons, opening to a pebble-strewn bay with crashing waves. At night, the stars were our canopy.

We took our meals in silence under a canvas tent and helped with common duties without speaking. We walked in solitude slower than turtles and sat on cushions, benches, and mats for hours on end. Through this continuous meditation, we practiced mindfulness.

Mindfulness? Meditation? You could say that we learned to focus attention on moment-by-moment experience, be it our breath, pain in our knees, or the sound of wind, waves, or rain. I immersed myself in everything exactly as it was, without trying to change it.

I learned to develop an attitude of curiosity and acceptance for whatever I noticed. Amid the silence surrounding me, I became aware of the relentless noise inside my mind.

"If you look closely, the endless stream of thought isn't very different from the stream of sounds or of physical sensations," says meditation teacher



Michele McDonald, who led the retreat. "When you begin to apply a concentrated awareness, you develop a completely different relationship with it, one that brings increased clarity and peace in our lives." The courage to stay present, then, was key to this meditation retreat.

Numerous studies have shown that meditation is a powerful ally in decreasing symptoms of pain, stress, and other physical or mental problems. A study published in 2011 in the journal *Brain Research Bulletin*, led by Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard researchers, details the neural mechanism of what happens. Meditators, says the lead author, neuroscientist Christopher Moore, are better at controlling certain brain activity patterns. This is thought to diminish the likelihood that stimuli will grab our attention.

An increasing body of evidence suggests that the adult brain can structurally and functionally change. Not surprisingly, modern medical health centers in Hawai'i and elsewhere encourage mindfulness-based meditation practices.

During my 10 days of silence, my thoughts slowed down, allowing a new feeling of alert lightness. Thoughts simply came and went. I became spellbound by the smallest experiences — the dew drop on a grass blade, a grasshopper landing on my shorts. I forgot myself and found peace indeed.

On my return to our faster, noisy world, I felt exquisitely clear and refreshed.

I'll be back. **15**