

## Seeking Solitude in Nature: A Meditation Teacher's Story by Stephanie Nash

By the time we're 60, we will have been alive for almost 22,000 days on this planet, rarely, if ever, stopping to watch just one. By immersion into nature in solitude, we allow the natural human to become entrained to the nature of the planet we are part of.

On the 7th day, my mind was flowing at the speed of sea fog. Or maybe that was the description of my nervous system. I felt so present with a gentle flow — and my mind felt open to whatever arises. Good stuff.

I had been camping in solitude in nature — on a hill over the ocean on the coast of California — as I have done twice a year for the past 20+ years. I jokingly call it my “People Fast”, which I have always assumed I needed since, as a meditation teacher and an actress, what I do in the world involves intense and intimate interactions with people, and I figured that we always need an opportunity to “clear out” and refresh or regroup ourselves.

But there is more to it than that — at least for me.

### Solitude In Nature For Monasticization

I find this immersion into nature - in total solitude - to be the most advantageous environment for cultivating deeper states, insights, and restoration. It is my monastery.

As a mindfulness meditation teacher, I am, of course, always encouraging people to set aside time to practice - whether formal eyes-closed practice or incorporating mindfulness into daily activities - so that they are “monasticizing” their daily lives for optimal growth and well-being.

I am also often encouraging people to go on retreats, where the environment of “unplugging”, being surrounded by people who are meditating, and not engaging in social chit-chat are conducive factors for delving deeper into one's internal experience and “rewiring” of stressful thought-feeling habit patterns.

While over 20 years of taking (and sometimes teaching) 2-4 retreats a year has been the foundation of my mindfulness practice and experience, it is in solitude where I get some of the most profound work done.

When at home, it is on my “organic nights” (where, in solitude, I courageously and playfully examine my experience) that many of my deepest insights have been born. However, the ultimate solitude is when I am camping in nature - surrounded only by

plants, animals, earth, sky, and water. This is when I experience that my environment meditates me.

### When Nature Unveils Itself

I have been coming to this same spot on the hill over the ocean now for many years (at least twice a year for 5-12 days each time) and I know it intimately. Yet every time I've come, my experience with weather, animals, and nature has been different and is always perfect - whether I have stunning sunsets over the ocean, am pelted with rain, freezing and huddled over some hot tea, or surrounded by sea fog the whole time with no sense of anything else existing.

Many years ago, I did a Native American vision quest. This is a sacred ceremony where one stays alone in nature without stepping outside of their site (which is an approximately 6'x6' square space) for four days with no food, no water, no tent, and no fire - with the idea that one is praying for a vision or dream.

I discovered then that sitting still and not moving when alone in nature - and especially without food - changes my relationship to animals in a wonderful way. Usually, animals just want to know if you have food or are looking to harm them, and when they ascertain neither is the case, you become to them just a big animal who happens to have made a nest in the middle of their world and they just go about their business. I love that. I love sitting in stillness as animals move around me.

So after that vision quest, I stopped hiking during my own solo camping retreats in nature - just to appreciate what is unveiled when I "park" and open to the world around me. There is great power in that stillness. It makes me feel so connected to the earth.

### Special Encounters With Animals

The special relationship to the animal kingdom is part of this natural monastery. I have endless stories of animal encounters. Today I will share three of them:

This past solo retreat, from which I just returned, gave me the experience of a family of quails - dad leading the way, followed by mom and two babies - who would come within 3-4 feet of where I was sitting (in total stillness) and graze around me as if I was not there.

One year a family of raccoons unzipped my tent in the night and made their way inside. I awoke to three large raccoons inside my tent and one was sitting on my legs in my sleeping bag! (And, yes, that was back when I was bringing more food than I do these days.) It was alarming but afterward, I found it amusing.

Last year, I had two young bucks come up the hill in front of me. First I saw antlers, then they came closer (to within 25 feet) and at one point they both turned and looked at me (again, I was totally still). They turned to each other and locked horns - pushing each other back and forth the way two brothers might do in play. (And, yes, I slowly reached for my camera and caught the last 60 seconds of this play on video). What I especially enjoyed, and caught on camera, was them just deciding to stop with the antler pushing, turning to look at me (almost as if to say, "You saw that, right?") and then returning to grazing, as if no such show just took place.

I do incorporate meditation strategies and techniques into my experience of solitude in nature, but only as suggestions, sometimes playful exercises, or momentary

considerations.

I rarely do eyes-closed formal practice when I'm in this particular monastery. I want to take advantage of the view that is being offered, and the lack of conversation to free up mental space to tune into what is happening in each moment.

#### Self-Inquiry Practice

For example, when setting up camp and making one of the 4-5 trips up the steep hill to my site from my car, pulling a little cart behind me (which is loaded with my camping gear, water, and other essentials), I find myself looking at the dirt trail beneath my feet since in order for me to pull the cart I need to lean forward.

The practice that I habitually do during this is a self-inquiry one: I look at the dirt, feel my body pulling the cart, and ask, who/what is pulling? Who/what is seeing? Who/what is feeling this? Because I've logged in years of doing this, within a few moments, my experience shifts to simply noticing this activity of pulling, seeing, hearing, and feeling. It is simply an activity happening with no "I" or attachment. I am not a person pulling a cart — pulling, feeling, seeing, and hearing is just happening. I am witnessing it. I experience great freedom and ease in this.

#### To Be In Ceremony

This self-inquiry practice is a sort of "setting up camp ceremony" that I naturally fall into. Being "in ceremony" — it is something that strengthens my commitment to and benefits from this ritual of solitude in nature.

From the moment I am packing to come — including the drive up, the schlep up the hill, the set up of my campsite, to my unpacking and leaving — I consider myself to be "in ceremony."

Through my commitment to this period as being for inner evolution, I am creating a sacred environment in which a kind of growth beyond my conceptual mind can happen.

#### In The Eye Of The Hurricane

While I do very little formal practice during my retreat to solitude in nature, I will "play" with mindfulness techniques and strategies - or even just experiment with my perception. Sometimes this is simply a playful experiment in reframing my experience. At other times it's a commitment to investigating the very nature of my experience.

Several years ago, I remember a favorite meditation experience at this special place. I lay in my tent one night, bundled in two sleeping bags, feeling quite safe and warm as the wind outside started to pick up. I felt so still and peaceful that I meditated on the stillness - of my body, thoughts, and feelings. I had parked my tent under a huge eucalyptus tree and when the wind picked up, water from the ocean air that has condensed on the leaves, started to fall like rain. I looked up at the tent and around me as the wind increased to a dramatic degree — to the point where my tent started to rip apart above me. I continued my meditation on stillness.

I had just previously worked with a client who had been experiencing intense kriya movements during deep meditation, and I encouraged him to allow his attention to focus on the stillness (the "eye of the hurricane") inside the "hurricane" of the kriya movement. This had been quite powerful and helpful for him so that the kriyas didn't pull him up out of deeper meditative experiences (which had been his complaint.)

My description to him was still fresh in my mind, and I found myself excited to get to practice delving into and appreciating stillness as my tent moved wildly around me and started to actually be ripped apart over me. It was a divine three-hour meditation until the wind died down and I ultimately went to sleep. (And yes, I patched up that old tent the next day and used that as an excuse to get a new one with a total net view of the world around me.)

### Tuning Into The Flow Of Nature

My normal daily experience when I'm camping in this natural monastery is to tune into the visual and sonic movement or "flow" of the trees and grass-like vegetation in the wind, the sound of the ocean crashing into the coastline a half-mile down below the hill on which I'm perched, along with the sound of a distant foghorn and the sea lions barking in a distant cove. Birds are my constant companion - soothing and delighting me, and at night, sometimes I will hear packs of coyotes, at times coming quite close, which can be rather exciting.

When I'm outside my tent, my body feels the movement of air - which always has a cool-to-cold-to-icy quality, even if the sun is out and the day is hot, due to the unique weather pattern of the land I sit on.

It is these movements of what I see, hear, and feel that I give over to. This flow massages me and I become it - until there is only the flow. I am not consciously applying any technique here, although my years of being trained to notice and appreciate "flow" have helped it become something that happens naturally for me without any effort.

"When I experience that my environment meditates me"

This past retreat, from which I've just returned, was one where I had days surrounded by sea fog. Watching the fog come around through the canyon to my left and right - I started to become meditated by the movement of the fog. It's like when you watch clouds, except these clouds are 40 feet from you and you have more intimate contact with it all. And once the sea fog fills the canyon, it starts to get thicker - and come closer - and soon, there is no ability to detect movement at all in the fog. It becomes this thick stillness. And I have become absorbed.

That was what meditated me for much of this past camping adventure. On the third or fourth day, I had decided to notice any emotional sensations in the body from any thoughts about the past and future that might arise. (This is an exercise I often give my students and clients whenever their mind has wandered in meditation - to quickly look to see what emotional sensations are present from having thought that thought - before returning focus to whatever was the intended technique or object of meditation. This can yield insights as well as tremendous sensory clarity around our thought-feeling experience.)

In 2017, research from the Brighton and Sussex Medical School (BSMS) has shown that listening to nature sounds can actually affect our bodily systems and help us to relax. Discover hundreds of free nature sounds to set a serene atmosphere.

So, here on my solo retreat, I had been tuning into subtle places of "holding" in body and mind and inviting them to release. I decided at that time to simply be present with the world around me and notice emotional sensations of any thoughts that may arise.

Three hours had gone by when I realized I hadn't had any such thoughts. This was novel

even for me. I had been watching the sea fog and listening to the sound of the ocean that I could no longer see. In the fog, sounds become blanketed — yet the sounds share the same “room” and, thus, the sound of the sea, then, can echo off of the trees so it seems to come from all directions and seems more intimate as it is offered on a platter as the soundtrack of your experience in that moment.

It seemed my mind had become one with this outer sea fog experience of sight and sound and feeling. I let go of any mindfulness exercises and simply gave myself over to allowing nature to massage me, to entrain my being into a lovely grounded presence.

### Solitude In Nature: A Gift Waiting To Be Experienced

People often ask me, when they find out I go alone into nature for such long periods of time, if I am scared – and also they want to know what I do. My typical response is that this is the safest womb I know – and I don’t know exactly what I do, but it’s all over in a flash. It seems I have just arrived and it’s time to go. I think this is mostly because I (or the sense of an identity that is Stephanie) disappears for most of the time I’m there, and I simply merge with the movement and stillness and richness of the natural world around me – disappearing into it – and re-emerging as a restored, grounded, profoundly contented being (and usually not without totally cool insights.)

I tell this story of my personal experience in solitude in nature, to share how we can do our meditation practice – to cultivate core skills of concentration, sensory clarity, and equanimity to get insights into our nature and what we are – and we can also allow ourselves to be meditated. We can do that in any environment.

I have found that solitude provides a perfect environment for this to happen naturally. When taking away social interactions and relationships, we can “let go” of any identity of who we are in relationship to anyone and release any ordering principle of who we are, what we want, what has happened in the past — to simply be present.

When we add immersing ourselves in nature, we get an extra special treat: we allow the natural human to become entrained to the nature of the planet we are part of. We allow our rhythm to get in tune with the natural rhythm that we are biologically part of and the benefits of meditation to happen without having to make any effort to meditate.

I will always remember my teacher, Shinzen, saying “You can learn as much from easing up as you can from bearing down”, which is a phrase I have repeated often to my students and clients – especially when I see them creating unnecessary tension from their efforting.

### Start By Sitting In A Park

Now, what I do isn’t everyone’s cup of tea. Being in solitude in nature is scary for many people, so I write this to give you a taste of what’s possible and to encourage you to go – even if just for ONE day – out alone into nature – just to see, hear and feel it.

And, at the least, you can, even if just for a few hours, find a place in a park nearby, sit under a tree and just tune into the tree, the plants, the birds, and allow yourself to be entrained – and let me know what you find – inside and out. It’s a gift waiting to be experienced.

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For more inspiration join this Saturday's Awakin Call with Stephanie Nash: Cultivating Health, Joy and Compassion in Solitude. More details and RSVP info [here](#).

Read more: Camping in solitude can be an act of stepping outside of your comfort zone. Learn more about this psychological state of familiarity.