

## **Retreat Practice in the Era of COVID-19**

In September 2020 Bodhi Retreats/Insight Meditation South Bay held a 10-night retreat at Ignatius House Retreat Center in Atlanta, GA. At the end of the retreat many students expressed gratitude and appreciation for how we utilized the facility, modified the program, and organized our retreat around sensible precautionary guidelines.

The participant quotes below describe how our community members felt being in a residential retreat led by Shaila Catherine during the pandemic. We hope it will give you a clearer sense of the experience and inspire the confidence to join us for residential retreat practice during the era of COVID-19.

The statements below are based on the experience of a particular retreat; the conditions may vary at other sites. Nevertheless, these voices communicate a sense of what it can be like to attend a residential retreat in the era of COVID-19. Specific details about each retreat site can be obtained through our registrars.

### **Participant Voices**

“Being on retreat with Shaila during the time of the coronavirus felt safer than any trip to the grocery store or public place simply because of the level of mindfulness of all involved in the retreat experience. Keeping distance was easy due to the small size of the retreat and the private rooms. Wearing masks was just another way to practice compassion for self and others.”

“Shaila’s retreat has surmounted obstacles posed by COVID public health issues and provided both a safe retreat environment and rich teachings on practice. I would come again to such a retreat in a New York second!”

“I really needed this retreat and it turned out to be more powerful and healing than I had dared to hope for. The isolation during this pandemic had dragged out too long at my home, and I was extremely eager to attend a retreat. But it was difficult to find one that I felt good about attending. I am thrilled that I found Shaila’s retreats. She organizes them with impressive dedication to details, deep compassion for the vulnerability of body and mind, and an intense spiritual urgency. The result is a strong retreat container in which the material conditions felt so safe that I was able to go deep into my practice.”

“It was such a joy and a relief to be on retreat again. The extensive procedures around reducing the risk of spreading COVID 19 provided a strong sense of trust and nurture. There was a melting away of built up tension of the past few months, and I was able to recharge my energy through deepening into meditation practice within spiritual community.”

“I thought long and hard before deciding to travel to this retreat. I had isolated myself in my home for several months. I am so glad that I ventured out and even got on that plane! The

retreat organizers took tremendous care to keep us all safe, with frequent disinfectant fogging, daily temperature checks, social distancing, and universal mask wearing. I wasn't sure if I would be able to meditate in a mask, but it turned out to be just fine."

"This retreat felt intimate and profound, even with social distancing and wearing face masks. We had 18 people on the retreat, and Shaila met with everyone outdoors. In the first few days we had small groups of four people, and for the remainder of the retreat we asked our questions by walking with Shaila outdoors in the fresh air. It was a perfect solution to the concerns of the times, and a perfect joy to experience such a small and intimate retreat."

"I was enthralled by the disinfectant fogging procedure that the guy from housekeeping used in the meditation hall, dining room, and lounge areas three times a day. He used a darling little machine that emitted a diluted peroxide-based mist into the air. It made a quiet pleasant hum, much softer than a vacuum cleaner. He gave special attention to all our chairs even though we kept the same seats throughout the retreat. I am sensitive to chemical scents, but only a couple of minutes after application my nose could no longer detect it. He disinfected the meditation hall while we were eating our meals, and he disinfected the dining hall after each meal. I was very impressed, and appreciated these sanitizing measures as a physical gesture of the loving care that the retreat center offers their guests."

"This very clean and professionally staffed retreat center offers a fabulous location for retreat practice in the time of coronavirus. We all had comfortable private rooms where we could meditate in solitude if we wished. Benches, observation decks, and screened meditation huts were positioned along the riverside trails, so I spent many hours sitting and walking in nature. Shaila offered a balanced schedule that combined structured and self-scheduled periods. We had the freedom to choose where and how to practice. I felt supported by the options, skillfully guided by the teachings, and protected by the staff."

"The social distancing was done so respectfully and compassionately that I felt a deep sense of comfort and ease at this retreat. Everyone was conscientious about their practice and respected the guidelines to protect each other from possible illness. I felt safer at this retreat than walking in my own neighborhood at home."

"Masks, social distance, hand sanitizers at every turn, disinfectant fogging ... It took me a few days to adjust to these unusual conditions, but I understand these are unusual times. Soon my resistance faded and it was really all just fine. I relaxed into a deep experience of meditation, watching the mind grow tranquil and clear behind a mask."

"Shaila inspires a strong motivation to practice knowing the breath and knowing the mind—by her personal example as well as by her depth and breadth of understanding, insight, and knowledge. It will take me some time to unpack her teachings: lots of food for practice."

“It has been a real privilege to be at Shaila’s retreats. I am deeply grateful for this opportunity to practice and the care that the organizers gave to making this a safe and profound occasion for deep meditation, even in the face of the current pandemic.”

“I would definitely practice again with Shaila, and I felt confident about the measures that were taken to protect us from the coronavirus.”

“I was hesitant to attend. But once I arrived it was clear that the organizers had very carefully considered all the ways to reduce infection risk.”

“This place was super clean! It was nice to see the daily disinfecting, but in view of the other procedures in place I thought that it was not necessary. We each sat in the same dining and meditation hall seats for the retreat, the density of people in the common spaces was low, and we all wore masks. Although I am not convinced that disinfectant fog was actually necessary, it was unobtrusive, and it gave me confidence that the staff was conscientious about protecting us.”

“In the first few days of the retreat Shaila experimented with a number of different types of face masks and face shields seeking a configuration that would not distort the sound of her voice too much. She settled on a standard disposable mask with a wire that held it securely on her nose. We could hear her quite well through that mask. I had assumed that it would feel weird to listen to teachings this way, but it turned out that the mask was not an impediment. The profundity of the Buddha’s words and Shaila’s joy in sharing the dhamma came through clearly.”