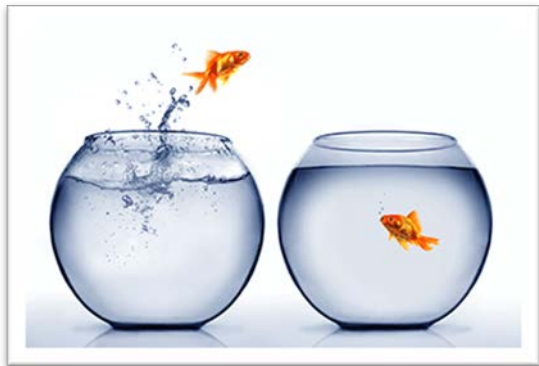




## Being isolated...

Being isolated can be a very difficult thing. Take it from me--I've spent plenty of my time on retreat at a Buddhist monastery, where meditation, reading, silence and solitude are the norms. Of course, going to a monastery isn't something anyone would usually do--in fact, it's the just opposite of what most people would usually do, which is the point--but maybe I can offer suggestions for handling some of the most difficult situations that have arisen for us during the pandemic.



## Impermanence

In ENG 220--the course for which I'm coordinator--I often talk about the topic of impermanence. I tend to introduce students to the idea of impermanence very early in the semester, because it's the foundation for everything that follows. For some people in the course, the thought of impermanence is the thing that shakes them utterly, and changes their behavior. While we're enduring the experience of the pandemic, it's important to keep the idea of impermanence in mind.

## But what does the word mean?

Impermanence is the recognition that everything changes. Nothing stays the same over time. Just like you: at one point you weren't a college student, and now you are. For some period, you'll take college classes. You'll do homework, or put off doing homework; you'll encounter professors who alter you, interest you, or bore you; you'll have ideas about what to do after graduation or what classes to take when a semester ends; throughout this experience, there will be countless changes. Not for a single moment will you stay the same. If you stayed exactly the same, you couldn't learn. Growing over time, developing skills, identifying what your interests are and deciding on the best path to pursue those--or, on the contrary, realizing what your interests definitely are not even if you've spent years thinking you wanted to be this or that--all of it is possible because things change.



## The things we enjoy...

That's the positive side of impermanence. There's another side too, since the things we enjoy are also impermanent. Our relationships, our good times, our experiences of pleasure, our happiness and joy, all these will change again. We have to remember this, because we can't stay in any one state forever. We can't experience pleasure forever and we can't be college students forever. At some point, we will graduate to a different situation. If we cling to some state we're in, it will be painful. That clinging arises from confusion, since we're not seeing the way things truly are.

I start with this thought because recognizing impermanence, the impermanence of everything, is an antidote to suffering. Despite that fact, it's also a hard thing for us to accept, because we tend to want things to be permanent. We want our pleasurable experiences to be permanent; we want the relationships in which we're happy to last, unchanged, forever. But nothing has that nature—investigate this for yourself. Even impermanence is impermanent, because everything changes at a different tempo, at a different rate, and in a different way.



## What does this have to do with isolation?

It's our foundation for coping with the experience of isolation, and of the pandemic itself, because all of this will change. It will become something else. You didn't have to isolate yourself from your friends in the past; in the future, at some point, you won't have to anymore. Wearing masks, fearing contact with others, the rules and protocols everywhere, waiting for a vaccine, periods of quarantining after an exposure, all of it is impermanent. In fact, if you pay attention to the ways these things change, that will be, itself, a teaching on the topic of impermanence. Paying attention to all those changes will confirm it for you. It will be a direct introduction to the way things really are.

## Recommendations...

1. Try to maintain a structured existence, as much as you can. Wake up at the same time every day, eat meals at the same time, and even if the lack of busyness seems to be the thing that bothers you, try to simplify your daily life as much as possible. Try to do less and less each day. When you eat, don't watch anything on a screen. Just eat. When you watch something, don't look at your phone. Just watch. If you're listening to music, just listen, and so on. Pay attention to how much you hadn't noticed before. Every experience has little details we wouldn't have noticed if we were distracted.
2. You should also read. Choose a book, any book that interests you. That way you'll get off-line for a little while. Try to read at a certain time of day: morning, late afternoon, maybe before bed. This could be a novel, nonfiction, any subject.
3. Consider keeping a journal. Try to write in it at the same time every day. Tell yourself about your daily experiences, or about the book you're reading. Go to the window and describe what's there, or how it used to be. Pay the closest attention to anything that changes, because everything changes.
4. If you can get out for a solitary walk, do so. On a daily basis.

## You are what matters...

In these ways, little by little, you'll get to know your own mind. You'll see yourself with increasing clarity. You'll begin to notice what matters, and what doesn't. Because right now it seems like everything you used to do was of utter, global importance, for you and everyone else. But the truth is that all of it was really impermanent—it was all something you merely invested with meaning. What really matters will be glimpsed by whittling everything else away—which is why people go on retreat in the first place.

