

Day in the life: Deer Park 1/4

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Date : September 3, 2012



I was provided the good fortune of spending the majority of this past summer at Deer Park Monastery in southern California. It was an opportunity for immersion; for building bridges and releasing my shells.

I learned much during this time, and in the next four posts I will aspire to communicate the essence of my experience by sharing a “Day in the life” from my time there. I find this style of writing to settle nicely between telling a story and sharing takeaways. The [Plum Village day in the life](#) has been the most viewed post on this blog, so either people are accidentally finding their way here by searching for Plum Village, or it's a writing style people appreciate. Or maybe

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it's both! :)

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5:25am Alarm. A soft harp, indicating I have 5 more minutes to rest. I turn over onto my stomach and stretch my arms. As my head sinks back into the pillow I succumb to a wave of relaxation.

5:30am Another alarm; this time a revving motorcycle engine, indicating it's time to physically get up. As I begin to stir a persuasion arises in the form of a whispered thought: *you could sleep in just this once...* I recognize this voice. It's my [morning coach](#), she's been absent as of late but this morning chose to grace me with her presence. I entertain her for about 3 seconds, and then sit up; decision made.

Sitting upright I recite a morning gatha (short themed poem/meditation):

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I vow to live fully in each moment

And to look at all beings with eyes of compassion

Over the past year this poem has become a mindful habit, recited silently each morning this year without exception. I slip into a pair of grey sweatpants and a hoodie, take a quick look in the mirror to make sure it's still me, and swing open the door. A dance between wood, metal, plastic and space creates the first sound of the day. It is a sound I can't describe in words and couldn't replicate with voice, yet an unmistakably unique creek and swoosh that I could recognize with a blindfold on as the door of room D4.

5:35am Walking towards the meditation hall I notice a freshness permeating the air around me. The monastery is situated in the mountains of Escondido, CA and many mornings begin with a slowly rolling fog. The fog somehow lifts fragrances from the surrounding flowers and trees, offering a medley of scents that enhance the sensual experience of breathing.

I walk steadily towards the hall, not too fast, and not too slow. There is a lone star over the mountains to my left; I wonder if it's planet? It is acknowledged with a nod.

5:40am Entering the main hall there are a couple dozen people already seated. The entire four-fold Sangha (monks, nuns, lay men, lay women) sits together in the morning, as the separate residences for the Monks (Solidity Hamlet) and Nuns (Clarity Hamlet) are close-by. It's a pleasant feeling all being together in the morning.

I slide by a couple brothers who are seated and they appear to be in deep concentration. Most people at the monastery don't talk much about their sitting practice, so I find myself curious as to how (and what) they're doing. I find a cushion, bow, and take my seat.

While sitting I attempt to strike a balance between structure (focusing on specific objects such as breath & body) and flexibility (allowing anything to arise in the field of awareness):

-With too much structure sitting meditation can become a 'technique', which can ironically

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snowball into an auto-pilot mode of going through the motions; a mode that is precisely what the process of mindfulness is designed to chip away at.

-With too much flexibility, at this stage of my practice I find it quite difficult to focus. Especially in morning meditations, without an object to focus on I find myself becoming quite mentally dull, a state sometimes referred to as "sinking mind."

I begin this particular sitting by counting ten full breaths from one to ten, helping to establish concentration. Then I scan my body, starting with the toes on each foot, just feeling the sensations that are present. Not trying to feel anything in particular, just tuning into what is present. There is a tingling sensation in both feet. I note it and continue scanning up the ankle, calf, kneecap, and eventually reach the crown of my head. At this point my body is feeling quite relaxed. I have my eyes open with a soft downward gaze as a protection against falling asleep. Closing them would be hazardous. I then re-direct my attention on the rise and fall of the belly.

6:30am A bell is invited (preferred terminology over "rung"), signaling the end of sitting practice this morning. As I move my body I am aware of the enhanced physical sensitivity and how something about my perception seems intangibly shifted.

There is a habit of wanting to assess my sitting and compare it to other experiences of sitting. This desire to judge comes from strong habit energies. Sometimes I emerge from sitting with supreme clarity: a razor sharp mind paired with an unshakable calm. Other times I am just biding my time until the bell is invited; the end can't come soon enough as my mind is like a shrieking monkey wanting to be anywhere but here.

My relationship to the habit of assessment is worth investigating:

-On one hand, in reality, there is really no such thing as a "good" or "bad" sitting. The same as there is no such thing as good or bad weather. The words good and bad are relative labels that we plaster on top of our experiences in order to make sense of them in a relative way.

-On the other hand, we want to cultivate experiences that make us happy, and most of those come from what we label as "good" experiences, however we define that word. If every time I sat down to meditate my mind was a shrieking monkey...to be honest, I'd probably stop doing sitting meditation. The same as if every time I walked outside it was cold, dark, and rainy, I would probably relocate to a different place.

So, again, there is a balance to be struck here. Of not reading too much into one sitting or one day's weather, and at the same time, recognizing when something needs to change.

6:35am I exit the hall and turn to continue my morning loop. A friend from college once told me that whenever possible he leaves a different way than he came in. In the spirit of exploring new territory I've adopted this behavior, and have found the circularity to be soothing and to create a sense of completion.

The sun is rising and a paradise of forms & colors is presented before me, all I need is to open my mind to see it. Lilac, sage and iris combine to create a bouquet of purple, pink, blues and various hybrids existing between these colors. It's a feast for the eyes. A few steps off the walking path and I spot a Kumquat tree. The fruit makes for a tasty and resourceful snack: it's

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bite-size, there's no peeling and no mess, and it's an intensely flavorful blend of orange and lemon.

6:45am Upon returning to room D4 I engage in my post-sitting pre-breakfast routine: I drop down for 30 pushups (20 in a row, pause, 5 more, pause, then one at a time) and 200 sit-ups (50 left side, 50 right side, 100 combo). As a habit it now requires very little effort, and ensures that regardless of what the day holds in terms of physical activity, at a minimum I've endured some physical tension.

I spring up, stretch, and head to the shower.

I turn only the cold knob to begin. While the cold water here doesn't reach ice-cold, it can still be a shock to the system. I pump myself up for the task by taking a few rapid breaths as I leap in shouting "Ain't nothin' but a peanut!" (A refrain from a rather ridiculous YouTube video featuring 8-time Mr. Olympian Ronnie Coleman referring to a 200lb dumbbells as peanuts.)

Exposing myself to physically uncomfortable situations in a relatively controlled environment has allowed me to practice embracing tension and watching the mind try and squirm its way out of the situation. Over time this practice strengthens one's ability to face the inevitable suffering that occurs in the course of one's life. Of course this can be practiced in ways beyond taking a cold shower (e.g. yoga) but it's a convenient way to explore this territory and there are suggested [health benefits](#) to cold showers which seem reasonable.

After 45 seconds under the shower-head (which feels like 5 minutes due to heightened awareness) I stand still and take 5 full breaths, on each exhale saying aloud softly "let go." After practicing embracing the experience it is now time to practice letting go. Letting go of tension in the body, thoughts of to-do's for the day, rehashing past conversations, and whatever else the mind has thought up this morning to distract me from fully experiencing this waterfall of sensation.

After getting dressed I make the bed, stretching sheets and tucking corners so that it is fresh for the day. Someone once told me that how you keep your room is a good indication of how you keep your mind. I recall that for most of my life I felt too busy to make the bed in the morning. Even though it takes a mere 20 seconds, it felt like a chore that was taking time away from more important things. Now, instead of returning each evening to disheveled sheets, I spend 20 seconds breathing and enjoying the process of contributing to the aesthetic of a well-made bed.

Before leaving for breakfast I read a short passage from "Arriving at your own door":

"The astonishing thing, so counterintuitive, is that nothing else needs to happen. We can give up trying to make something special occur. In letting go of wanting something special to occur, maybe we can realize that something very special is already occurring, and is always occurring - namely, your life unfolding in each moment in awareness."

7:25am Entering the breakfast hall I glance at the schedule written on the board. The schedule varies slightly by day, with most days including a period of sitting meditation in the morning and walking meditation in the afternoon. I've never been too fond of other people creating a

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schedule for me, so at first I felt slightly reluctant to be in a place with such a regimented schedule. But it didn't take me long for me to realize the wisdom inherent within:

Nearly everyone in a monastery wants to practice sitting & walking meditation to some degree, as they are fundamental cornerstones of mindfulness practice. Left to our own devices though, this formal practice can be quite difficult to make time for. Getting up at 5:30am to sit sounds nice, but how many of us have the discipline to do it on our own day-in-day-out, especially in absence of any pressing need other than to sit and be present? That's what a schedule is for. In essence, we are choosing to be in a place where there is a specific time for sitting to ensure that regardless of what else we have going on that day we are given the opportunity to sit, an opportunity no one can take away from us.

In this way, paradoxically, structure creates freedom. Freedom to practice without distraction, be it internal or external.

Next up, breakfast!

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