

Waking up I smile

a brand new day is before me...

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Day in the life: Deer Park 2/4

Categories : [Travel](#)

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Date : September 17, 2012



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7:30am While in the breakfast line I see a blueberry scone at the end of the table - my eyes light up! I ate scones as a child, and am rediscovering how the potent combination of a dry scone and heaps of strawberry jelly can result in deep satisfaction.

After finding a seat at a large round table I take time to reflect on this meal. Breakfast is held in silence, building upon the energy of concentration cultivated in the meditation hall and providing an opportunity to focus attention on one thing: eating.

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Over the last six months I have continuously refined my meal gatha and have now settled on a series of lines which, at present, captures the essence of what I want to remember before, during, and after, eating:

This food is a gift of the whole universe; the sun, the sky, the earth, numerous living beings, and much energy.

-A declaration of the interconnectedness of life, and of the many conditions required in order to manifest this food on my plate. I look at a banana slice situated atop the oatmeal as I recite this line, marveling at how a combination of sunlight and water can transform a tiny seed into this edible, soft-textured and tasty thing we have agreed in the English language to call "a banana." I imagine how it felt to be the truck driver waking up at 4:30am to drive cartons of bananas from the farm where it was grown to some distribution center I've never heard of. I thank him for his service.

Each time I recite this line I practice focusing on a concrete specificity of my current experience...this morning it is a banana slice. Bringing new items into awareness helps ensure the recitation does not turn into auto-pilot.

May we eat in mindfulness, and gratitude, so as to be worthy to receive this food.

-Reminding myself that the availability of food is not to be taken for granted, on the word 'gratitude' I close my eyes and conjure up a rather haunting [image](#) of a starving child in Africa crawling to a food bank while a vulture waits nearby. There is a great deal of suffering present in the world, and reminding myself of this each time I eat assists in my capacity to be aware of this noble truth.

May we transform our unskillful mental states, especially our greed, and learn to eat in moderation.

-Eating is a targeted opportunity to focus on transforming greed. It is a laboratory by which I can gauge whether I am wanting more than I need, and then to observe the effects of this discrepancy. As the breakfast food is relatively consistent (oatmeal, cereal, soy milk, bread) discerning the right amount of food isn't too difficult. Once I've become more in tune with wants vs. needs at breakfast, then the practice expands to observing greed during lunch & dinner, where options are more diverse. It then expands to non-meal settings: a chocolate bar in my room, do I keep it hidden to myself or share it with friends? Then of course it expands well beyond food altogether: am I greedy for attention? For praise? For recognition? Why?

I smile to those seated around me and begin eating.

8:15am After breakfast I head into the office to do some work. This summer I have been dedicating a healthy portion of my time to supporting the [Wake Up](#) movement in its many manifestations.

Today I am compiling a master list of Wake Up Ambassadors, instrumental individuals who have supported local mindfulness communities. There are people from all over the world who are finding ways to practice together. Right now the list is in the form of an online text document, and as multiple people sent in a list of names there are varying formats for how each

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Ambassador's information is entered (i.e. 'name, country, email' vs. 'name, email, country'). I'll clean up the list to make all entries consistent, and then enter the information into a mailing program. There are also some website update requests that I will synthesize and send to the programmer and developer working on our website. Lastly, there is a recent talk from Thich Nhat Hanh that has been transcribed; after reading through it I'll upload it onto our online community platform, ensuring it is correctly categorized and shared with the appropriate people.

I chuckle recalling a conversation with a friend from home who asked "So what is it that you actually do?" I remember when I was first interviewing for consulting and I asked a senior partner how he would describe his job, and he said something to the effect of "depends on the project, depends on the day, depends on the person asking."

Before a working session begins I like to place my hands on top of my closed laptop and just breathe. So much time in modern society is spent in front of a screen; without a strong intention (and regular [breaks](#)) it is easy to get lost. I recite a self-composed handwritten gatha taped to the top of my computer to ready myself for the tasks at hand:

*Opening my computer I open my heart,
A wondrous machine, may I use it skillfully,
Breathing in, I recall my purpose,
Breathing out, I focus my attention.*

10:00am A [mindfulness bell](#) goes off as my 90-minute Yo-Yo Ma playlist ends. I breathe. I stand up from the desk and stretch, noticing through the window that the morning fog has lifted and the sky shines a brilliant blue. I feel good. There are a couple monks in the office, and I take a moment to check-in with them. There is an upcoming Wake Up retreat at Deer Park, where we'll have around 50 young adults come to the monastery to practice for a week. We are discussing the schedule and they inquire if I'd like to moderate a panel of lay practitioners near the end of the retreat. I am honored to have been asked and happily agree. I look at the list of attendees and familiar names bring me a smile.

I choose another 90-minute playlist, this time a combination of two CDs, one called [Affairs of the Heart](#) which was given to me by my eldest sister, and the other a set of Chopin songs from the brilliant movie *The Pianist*. One of the songs on the playlist is Chopin's [Nocturne in C-sharp minor](#) which I was recently inspired to learn on the piano. The opening chords get me every time.

11:30am I find the time I finish working in the morning to be a relatively reliable metric of how I'm feeling. My target on most days is 11:30am. If I finish then I usually am feeling good, if it's 11:45am I feel okay, and 11:55am I feel stretched. Lunch starts at 12:00pm

When I first arrived, the desire to finish near 11:30 was predicated solely on my perception of the impression that I was making for others. I didn't want to be "that guy" who always came into the dining hall late. The few busy days that I finished even a minute past 12pm I would feel slightly ashamed walking into the hall. Over time though, I noticed that other people who occasionally came in past 12 didn't seem too bothered. Why was I so overly concerned?

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As a youth I didn't always get along with my siblings, and I think there were some seeds watered at a young age that made me yearn for acceptance. This continued into elementary school when all the cool kids wanted to sit by Bobby G. I was puzzled as to why, when entering the lunchroom, Bobby was beckoned while I received the Forrest Gump treatment of lowered heads, wide shoulders, and shifty glances. I actually asked my 3rd grade teacher once why he was popular and it appeared I wasn't.

This desire to be viewed positively by others is part of being human, but if uncared for it can distort behavior in unhealthy ways.

As I got older this desire manifested in many of my relationships, particularly romantic ones. Attempting to get others to like me by showcasing all my strengths, and not taking the time to ask if this is something I really want to get into. It has resulted in some unnecessary suffering, and over time I'm learning to care for these insecurities.

11:40am Walking outside of the office I see the sun is beaming; I smile.

There is a sparkling pond in front of me, full of Koi and turtles of various shapes and personalities. As I walk by I am greeted to a series of *plops* as sunbathing turtles rush to submerge themselves at the sound of footsteps. There is one brave reptile remaining on the edge of the rocks, unsure if my approach signals threat. His scaly neck is stretched at an angle as beady eyes look as if they're trying to get a closer look. Except he's looking the wrong way. His cousins are swimming, making their way towards lilly pads while the nearby Koi nibble on grass at the bank of the pond.

The trees surrounding the pond provide a stage for the soundtrack of the scene, as hummingbirds hum, acorn woodpeckers peck, crows crow, and goldfinches...well they chirp.

11:50am Across the pond are a couple lay friends sitting together chatting before lunch. I mosey on towards them. There's Oklahoma, a 20-year-old who was raised in the south and who is on a west coast road-trip. He decided to stop by Deer Park for a week after reading a couple of Thich Nhat Hanh's books. He is wide-eyed and enthusiastic, a good reflection of beginner's mind. And there's the Doc, a 30-something ER surgeon from Connecticut who had his entire life flipped upside down when he suffered a stroke. What was once a solid identity as *"I'm a doctor...and a damn good one at that"* has disintegrated with the inability to hold a scalpel in his left hand. Out of this emptiness is emerging a more stable and refined sense of self. It takes time to ripen, all good things do, and it's been a joy to be there for a slice of it.

As they are both new to the monastery they ask me questions about the work I'm doing, how long I've been here, what I've learned. I share a bit about Wake Up and they are both enthralled, immediately sensing how powerful (and timely) such a community could be in transforming modern society. I share some of the initiatives we are building and their excitement translates into personal praise: "Wow, you're doing such amazing work! You must be doing something right."

While I do appreciate their sentiments, I am careful around taking credit. While it feels great to

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have a sense of doing something meaningful, this is also the most fertile ground for superiority to slip in unnoticed, potentially eroding the quality of my action.

I notice it now, the sun shining and pride slowly swelling. I spot a couple people walk by who are on the cooking rotation, and a whispering judgment stirs that somehow what I'm doing is more important than what they are doing.

I laugh at this momentary feeling of inflated self-importance. There were a couple days in June where I was on my own at the monastery, almost all the monastics and lay friends had gone to Yosemite and I was heading to a wedding that weekend. Those two days I spent more time in the kitchen than I had the entire previous month, and let me tell you, it wasn't pretty! I scrounged up every piece of ready-to-eat food that I could, and survived off of cereal and old bread for pretty much every meal. Because of this not only did I have much less time to do work but when I did sit down in the office I felt less energized because my nutrition wasn't up to standard. This experience helped put things in perspective.

It's not just me that is helping the Wake Up movement (or anything else for that matter) grow...it's the cooks that provide food, the carpenters that provide a building, a desk, a chair, the electricians that provide a power outlet and supply, and the list goes on and on and on. There are countless conditions that allow me the time and energy to be able to do "my work." For that I am grateful.

As Albert Einstein put it in his essay "The World as I See it": *A hundred times every day I remind myself that my inner and outer life are based on the labors of other men, living and dead, and that I must exert myself in order to give in the same measure as I have received and am still receiving...*

Next up, lunch!
