

Day in the life: Deer Park 4/4

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Date : November 30, 2012



Continue from [Part 3](#)

4:45pm After walking meditation we enter the big hall for a 30 minute afternoon sit. The flavor of the afternoon sitting is different from the morning; for me it feels lighter...like a cool breeze circulating through the various recesses of my mind.

A friend once told me it took him many years before his daily sitting meditation transformed into just sitting to sit. If I examine my own experience of meditation (sitting, eating, walking), it has followed a non-linear progression that I'd guess some others have gone through as well.

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- a.) First, not meditating, because why in the world would you do that? You're already busy enough as is.
- b.) Then, meditating for the first time, maybe because you knew others who were doing it or you read about some scientific benefits around stress reduction, increase in brain functions, immune system improvement...or you were just totally strung out and looking for an escape.
- c.) Then, having tasted some tangible benefit (calm mind, alert attention, etc.) becoming really jazzed about this whole meditation thing, and vowing to do it consistently because of how great it is.
- d.) Then, inevitably falling off that wagon, because life seems to get in the way and you become too busy, and your meditations aren't providing the calm/insight they once did, and that extra sleep is really important, and, well, you're probably good as is.
- e.) Then, over time, feeling that something fundamental is off, and perhaps that meditating may shed light on what that is.

C-D-E cycle through for a while.

f.) Then, one day, you decide that you're done with excuses and you're going to make a serious commitment, rain or shine, home or away, to practice meditation every single day. And you actually stick to it. Not because you feel like it every day and not because every time is amazing, good, or even pleasant, but because the intention to understand your experience of life is stronger than the many excuses the mind creates to avoid it.

Everyone takes a different path and I'd imagine there are plenty of stages beyond f, but that's for another day.

5:30pm The meditation hall has cleared out, and there is a half an hour before lunch. I have grown to enjoy these little pockets of time in between activities. This evening, the piano beckons. It's a basic upright piano, slightly out of tune, but more than enough to stir the pleasantries within.

Today I practice Chopin's haunting [Nocturne in C-Sharp Minor](#). It's a piece right at the edge of my current skill level and it moves me deeply. There a couple parts in particular that I especially enjoy about this piece: at 1:17 the whole piece lightens up with a series of playful major chords and at 1:29 it parallels this same series with minor chords, pairing lightness with darkness. Then at 3:09 & 3:14 there's a concentrated flurry up and down the keyboard and at 3:20 you think it's going to happen a third time but it stops short, tempting, before slowly delivering it's final release...a quiet triumph of C#.

Sometimes I have guests listening, but most of the time it's just me. The sounds float through the hall, and as I conclude the days practice I take a moment to revel in the silent afterglow of artistic pursuit.

6:00pm The dinner bell is invited and I make my way up a set of stairs for the third and final meal of the day. While eating this evening I spot a new arrival who is eating rather quickly, slurping his pumpkin soup one hasty spoonful after another. I smile. I am reminded of a guy in

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[Plum Village](#) who I connected with who would blitz through his meals, finishing in under five minutes and then impatiently wait (my perception from his body language) for the finishing bell to be invited.

I approached him about it once and he said that he would really like to slow down but he just keeps forgetting. One bite in mindfulness and then he blinks and the meal is gone. He knew he should slow down but it was a habit he just couldn't shake, try as he might. I asked him if he wanted to play a game with me. Bite-for-bite. He couldn't move his hand until I did, and in between bites the hand rested gently on the table. He was game.

Sitting across the table from one another as if we were in some bizarre wild-west-slow-eating-match, we gave each other a solemn nod and began eating. Whenever he started to take a bite without me I would signal by clearing my throat or pointing to his hand. We did this for weeks. There were times when I didn't feel up to it, but I had made a commitment to help and drew on that to follow through when motivation was low and I wanted to just sit by myself. At first we would sit right across from each other. A week later and we experimented sitting at different tables, but always within eye-sight. Then after some time, we were eating dinner together one evening and the guy next to him looked at him and said "Man, your eating is much more peaceful now, I'm impressed." We smiled.

Sometimes it takes a teacher to help guide. I've been fortunate to have many throughout my life, and in this case I was able to pay it forward; all I had to do was eat slow!

6:45pm As I'm nearing the end of my meal I see a thin strand of ants coming and going out of a small hole where an electrical socket used to be. There is a potted plant in the corner of the room, and the ants are traveling through the hole to the plant, and then back out again. I notice that the ants traveling in opposite directions often bump into each other on their way.

Eyeing my curiosity with this mini-world, the couple next to me mentions that this 'bump' is actually the ants exchanging bio-feedback signals with each other on where to go and what to do. The signal usually comes from the queen and is what enables them to build. Whoa. I look at this same trail of ants, but now with fresh eyes and a new appreciation for what they are doing. I've likely seen tens of thousands of ants over my life but never stopped to appreciate how complex they actually are. I'm riveted watching them build a nest and imaging what their bio-feedback signals are like:

"Whoa dude, you're going the wrong way!" I imagine one says to the other.

"No man, didn't you hear? Queen moved the party to the trash can out back."

Again?! Why can't she make up her mind?

Quit yer complainin'! Hey, pick up that slightly decomposed bee wing for me will ya?"

We (humans) continue a conversation about the environment and our interaction with the earth. Environmental sustainability is something I know so little about, but which resonates deeply as I learn more. I gradually feel my eyes opening to our intimate and infinite connectedness with other beings, both big and small.

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7:15pm After dinner I begin to wash my dishes, sinking my hands into warm soapy water. My first real connection with Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings was through a passage in *Peace if Every Step* which talked about washing the dishes. It stated simply that if one rushes through washing dishes in order to eat dessert, then that same habit of rushing is likely to interfere with the enjoyment of dessert...the mind rushing to think of what to do next.

I smile wondering if me 5 years ago could have imagined what an effect that passage would have on the direction of my life. A pebble's ripple can reach the size of the ocean.

7:30pm I make my way back to D4, where the day began many hours ago. There is a white chair outside the room, facing the sunset over the mountains beyond. It is beckoning me to sit; I answer the call.

It is "photographer's light", that special time in the evening where nature is illuminated by a soft golden hue. I bask in this light, admiring the way it outlines the leaves; so graceful and yet so precise. I feel that I'm looking at a great work of art...a painting that has meticulously blended light and shadow, detail and depth. What have I done to deserve such beauty? I ask myself this question often. I remember those who came before, and paved the path for me to be here in this moment. My ancestors, both blood and spiritual, are to thank. Gratitude swells.

Time to head inside.

7:45pm Entering the room I plop down into a floor chair I brought from home.

There is a piece of paper taped to the side of the bed which reads "Darling, I am here for you." These words are known as the First Mantra. Thich Nhat Hanh speaks of this as an understanding that the most precious gift we can give to another is our full presence. Oftentimes we may think that what another person needs is inspiring speech or material gifts, but perhaps they just need you to really *be there* for them. When I look at this it is a reminder to be there for others, and also to be there for myself.

During a recent Q&A session (which one of the monastics said may be more accurately termed 'Question & Response'), one of the respondents told a story about how it's important to physically move around pieces of paper like that, otherwise over time they can become unnoticed as they recede into the landscape of our day-to-day. I find truth in this and think it applies to many things in life. We have to keep coming up with ways to surprise ourselves and stay fresh.

I spend some time with Omnifocus, surveying what I have committed myself to for this week. It feels good to review my work, but I have to be careful not to spend too much time planning; lest I forget the law of impermanence.

8:30pm I head into the bathroom to brush my teeth. The last time I visited a dentist she commented that my gumline was receding, probably due to the way I was brushing. After explaining my brushing to her she offered a couple correctional instructions: brush softer and focus on one tooth at a time. For the former, I was holding the brush too firmly, thinking that I

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really had to apply force to clean them. She demonstrated the level of pressure required and I was astonished at how light a touch was needed. For the latter, I realized that out of habit I just brushed back and forth a bunch of times until I felt finished, but in that process I was crossing over some areas multiple times and missing other areas altogether. Her suggestion: "This may sound odd...but try focusing on one tooth at a time." When I heard this I laughed. I recalled a couple years ago reading a [definition](#) of mindfulness by a Stanford Psychologist. I sent it to some friends as I thought it offered a decent and brief explanation. One part that I was unsure about, though, was a sentence on how life may become burdensome if we had to give our full attention to everything, and the example was used of brushing our teeth. Far from being burdensome, I came to realize that not only have I been able to enjoy the process more, but focusing intently was actually healthier for my gums!

8:45pm My nighttime rituals contain much more variance than their morning counterparts. After months of trial and error I realized that attempting to set a specific nighttime regimen was more effort than it was worth in this setting. Sometimes I feel like reading, other times like writing, other times listening to music, others doing sitting meditation, others just lying in bed. The internal resistance to a certain activity was my mind's way of telling me to balance structure and flexibility, and that morning may be more suited for the former and evening suited for the latter.

This evening I feel like listening to music. I put on my night-time playlist, starting with "Passenger Seat" by Death Cab for Cutie. It is one of the very few songs I can repeat without losing effect; over the years I have listened to it hundreds of times. The simplicity of gentle piano paired with soothing vocals and poignant lyrics transport me to a place of deep relaxation.

9:30pm Lights out - Feel tired. It's a good feeling. It was a full day, and I did my best.