

Waking up I smile

a brand new day is before me...

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Day in the life: Plum Village 1/2

Categories : [Travel](#)

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I've made it to about the halfway point of my three months living at a monastery, and had the idea to do a 'day-in-the-life', as an interesting way to [communicate](#) what I was up to. A monastery is out of the ordinary for many people, and thus may be difficult to conceptualize what an extended stay might entail. Plum Village isn't your typical monastery, but then again, is there a typical monastery? So with that in mind, I will present part 1 of "A day in the life at Plum Village." It should be noted that this is both no single day and yet somehow captures a bit of every day. I hope it brings you nourishment to you.

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5:15am. Doorbell alarm sounds. Eyes open. Above me reads a gatha (short themed poem/meditation) taped to the wood of the bunk-bed above me. I recite it silently to myself, a breath for each line:

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I vow to live fully in each moment
And to look at all beings with eyes of compassion

As I say the last word I slow my speech so that the 'nnnn' fades away and I feel my lips once again touch. I place my feet on the cold floor, take a full breath, and put on a few more layers before going outside.

5:20am. I'm out the door and on the way to the meditation hall, a short 3 minute walk. It rained last night, so I step around mud puddles, as I make my way towards the small lampposts lighting the way. It takes a minute but I realize I'm walking faster than I need to. Why am I rushing? I slow my pace; it feels nice.

5:30am. The hall is dimly lit and the air is fresh and light. There are 8 rows of cushions placed in the hall, each with about 30 cushions in each row. The middle 4 rows are for the monks, the outside 4 for lay friends. I find a meditation cushion facing the window. I bow and remind myself of my intention before sitting "may I grow in awareness". Taking my seat I remember to sit with dignity, upright but not too rigid. I begin to follow my breath at the rim of my nostrils, staying with the whole in-breath, the whole out-breath. The mind starts to wander, "I ate too much for dinner last night, I should choose the smaller bowl...Did I remember to email that list of teacher names for the upcoming retreat...I hope it's sunny today, if so maybe I'll take a walk to the nearby church..." As soon as I notice that I'm thinking I see the thought as a bubble and it pops, noting silently how long I had been thinking (9 seconds this time) I go back to my breath. Again the mind wanders this time to how my left shoulder is feeling, again I bring it back. It wanders yet again, yet again I bring it back. Halfway through I have a small insight about the nature of judgment involving other people: judgment is limited by your knowledge, and when it comes to other people, the assessment is almost always based on incomplete information. Once you understand someone more fully you tend to judge them less or hardly at all. Why not resolve to give everyone the benefit of the doubt in the first place? I mentally note it and resolve to explore it more after the sitting. I go back to my breath.

6:30am. A bell sound to signal the end of the sitting. I feel light, fresh. I stretch my legs, pull out my notepad and write a few things down. Walking out of the hall is a pleasant experience, the wood is smooth and your feet just kind of glide along with everyone else.

6:45am. Breakfast time. I enter the line serving oatmeal. I am tempted to go for the large bowl, but I remember the last few times when I had food left over, and take the small bowl. I start serving myself and recognize the point where I could go for one more scoop of oatmeal or not, and I decide not to. If I am hungry I can always get more later. Adding some soy milk I then load the oatmeal with raisins, prunes, walnuts, and some peanut butter. Smells great. I make my way to a dining bench and sit. Holding my hands together I recite a couple lines to myself, thanking

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the sun, sky, earth, and numerous living beings for providing this food here for me to enjoy. I smile at those seated around me, breakfast is held in a comfortable silence. I look at my first bite of the day, a spoonful of goodness.

7:15am Finishing breakfast, I walk outside into the darkness, back to my room. I am residing in a two-story room with 7 people total. It has a bathroom and shower in the room; quite a luxury for these parts! One of my roommates is upstairs at his desk, and I stop up to say hello. He's an energetic young Dutch guy who is thinking about doing the 5-year monastic program. Right now he's immersed in some calligraphy, as he's a talented artist. He asks me if I want to try some, sure why not? My handwriting has never been very good, but that's no reason not to try. He says to just feel the flow of the pen, not to think too much about each stroke. Makes sense. I tap into whatever creative juices exist and write a calligraphy: "Breathe! You are alive." It looks nice (for a beginner), I'm pleased.

8:30am I step into the shower, first with some cold water to stimulate the immune system. It is always a jolt to feel cold water in the winter, but it can be a good practice. After 20 seconds of cold I turn it to warm, and allow the hot water rush over me and soothe. After the shower I do some reading. I have a few options to choose from, and today I find myself reading a short article about mindfulness in education. It is an article outlining the current trends in research, as there have been a few major studies recently which have shown promising results from teaching basic mindfulness techniques in the classroom. I take a few notes on the article, highlighting some of the results and areas to follow-up on.

9:30am Stepping outside it is sunny and brisk, and I head to class for all the long-term (staying for one month or more) lay folks. Upon entering the hall I smile at a few familiar faces; today we are discussing store consciousness. Store consciousness is a term for the part of your mind which houses all of the 'seeds'. Seeds of happiness and compassion alongside seeds of anger and greed. A simple example: when we're not angry, we often think anger does not exist within us. We may be walking down the road feeling quite good about life, no anger in sight. Then someone rushes past us and bumps into us on their way, not apologizing or even recognizing we were there. Anger arises (unless we're from New York) where did it come from? The seeds have always been there, the event just watered them. We speak of cultivating seeds of compassion. Let's say you were in a desert walking with a backpack full of food and a gallon of water. You see someone starving, thirsty, minutes from death. Would you help? Most of us would feel compelled to be kind, watering the good seeds. Why not view all humans as someone in desperate need for kindness and compassion? One of our tasks as a meditator is the systematic cultivation of good seeds.

11am. I head back to my room for a few minutes of rest. I cozy up into my bed, draping a blanket over the side of the bed so that it is shielded from room. One of my roommates is a quiet elderly Austrian, and he refers to this setup as 'my castle'. The Dutch calligrapher left a piece of chocolate on my bed, so I take a few breaths, pop it into my mouth, and sink into some tunes. I start with something light, "Sun" sung by a nun who resides at a monastery in New York. It hits the right chord. I'm feeling in the mood for some Pink Floyd, so I put some Dark Side of the Moon. I let the music lead me where it will, when "Time" comes on I am pummeled by the guitar and emerge wide-eyed in a state that only be captured with a single word: "whoa".

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11:30am By now it has warmed up, and I leave my hat behind and step out into the sun. It's time for walking meditation, and everyone gathers under a tree in the center of the monastery. We sing a few songs together, and then the walk is led by an American monk who went to Dartmouth and who I spent some time with on the Wake Up tour. He leads us around the perimeter of the hamlet, and I am aware of all the sounds around us. Birds singing, leaves crunching, wind blowing. Side-stepping some mud I time my breath with my steps for a few paces, then let my breath rest where it's at. We pause at the top of hill, where there are a set of 8 statues which have recently been placed on the lawn. They fill the space quite nicely, and this spot has become a favorite of mine. Looking out from here you can see a panoramic view of the French countryside, and a small Catholic church way up on a hill. I remember my walk there last week with a friend who was heading to Japan soon to work at the British embassy there. We had a great walk together in the sun. I do some stretches and the walk continues, breathing in, breathing out everyone goes together.

12:30pm Lunch time. First comes rice, a daily staple here, after that there is a mushroom stew which looks delicious. I pour some olive oil on the dish along with a touch of soy sauce. Taking my seat, I dedicate my first bite to my family and friends. While eating I practice bringing two things into awareness: how tightly I hold the eating utensil and how often I spill food on the table. For the former, oftentimes we grip objects harder than is necessary to hold them. Over time this can result in unnecessary tenseness in our body, and it is also just an inefficient use of energy. It's a small thing, but it brings awareness back to my body while I'm eating, and I enjoy practicing it. For the latter, I have always been a messy eater (runs in the family, well just my dad really!) A long-time source of humor for friends, I realize now how unaware I am of how my hands are moving while I'm eating. Bringing attention to this movement has reduced the occasions where I leave a rice trail. I'll have to think of other ways to keep my friends entertained when I come back home...

At end of my meal a Canadian guy who plays the didgeridoo in the evenings comes up to me and says "Hey Brandon, heard you're good at table tennis, let's play". I feel summoned. Game on.

Continued in [Part 2](#)