

Day in the life: Plum Village 2/2

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1:30pm: I grab my table tennis paddle from the residence and make my way to the open field. On my arrival a look of amusement appears on my friend's face: "Oh you brought your own paddle...you must be really good huh?" I feel some pride swell up, the game begins. We have some good volleys, although I am winning most of the points. Pride creeps in again as I am feeling superior, and then I remember some of semi-pros I've played who wiped the table with me. I loosen up and continue having fun. Near the end I can tell the opponent is frustrated, and

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he starts missing serves. I make a suggestion to take a breath, and that 'each point is a new game'; he smiles and serve again. There is one monk at a nearby hamlet who is recognized as the best player in Plum Village. When I first met him he said "I heard you're good, I want to learn from you." I was struck by such an attitude; the top guy saying that he wanted to learn! I then recognized the obvious truth that such an attitude is the only way he's going to get better. Pride can be dangerous if you don't know how to transform it. My friend and I finish our game and he thanks me, mentioning how growing up with brothers everything was a competition, and that he's working on this competitive habit. Here we have space to examine those influential relationships, most often springing from the roots of our parents and siblings. I smile.

2pm After the game I grab my computer and head into the office to do some work. I was invited to Plum Village in part to offer my business/organizational strategy skill-set to the community. I feel incredibly grateful that the [universe aligned](#) in a way to allow me the opportunity to apply my background towards something I truly believe in. There are two initiatives I'm assisting with at the moment: the first is Wake Up, which helps young adults start their own mindfulness communities where they live. The second is Applied Ethics, which has a mission of bringing mindfulness practices more into education. On both of these initiatives I've been assisting with day-to-day project management (e.g. helping to organizing a [Wake Up university tour](#) and a week-long Applied Ethics retreat) as well as more higher level tasks (e.g. building a website for both initiatives and managing volunteers who want to help). Today I'm synthesizing notes from our recent retreat and writing up a post-retreat survey that we'll send out to everyone who attended. There's also a list of people who have offered assistance to help out for future events so I'm keeping track of their info in one place.

Alright, time for some work. I begin with a and a deep breath, put on some YoYo-Ma (his CD with the Silk Road Ensemble) and dive in.

3:30pm The mindfulness bell sounds, signifying that it's time for a break. I tear myself away to take a breath but before I can exhale there is gnawing feeling that I didn't get as much done as I wanted. I've felt this many times before, it this sensation of falling behind complemented with a creeping sense of urgency. I feel that if I could have that 90 minutes over again I could have accomplished more. The fact is, I will never have those 90 minutes again, I will only have this moment...and this one...and this one. I am aware of the arbitrary nature of my judgment that this was "unproductive". But my mind still is sputtering with "well that wasn't very productive, aren't you supposed to be mindful in each moment?; you STILL haven't responded to Eric's email; why are there 10 tabs open? What time is dinner?" I take another breath and work to separate skillful thoughts (i.e. those I can do something about now) from unskillful ones (i.e. self-criticism and irrelevant thoughts). In the short-term, I resolve to be more clear in the next working session about what I want get done. In the long-term I resolve to re-examine my commitments.

My practice of balancing doing with [being](#) is not unique to just me, and is exemplified in the entire "Engaged Buddhism" movement that is revolutionizing the way Buddhist monasteries operate. The same as I am being carefully aware of where my energy goes, so is it with the community as a whole. It is an evolving dance between productivity with that which is currently on my plate, and deciding how much I want to pile on in the future. Even at the monastery one can be over-committed...

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I unsubscribe from a weekly email newsletter which I have always been meaning to read but never do. I tune into some Glenn Gould and power through another hour.

4:30pm I walk outside and the air is crisp. It's that magical time of day when the sun casts vibrant golden light at a low angle, and everything is illuminated with a soft glow. I take a slow walk, and follow the path we often use for walking meditation. There hangs a sign: "Go as a river", and I sidestep some mud and breathe in the fresh winter air. I begin to think of what may be for dinner, and I realize I'm walking as if I'm in a rush. I slow down, breathe, and maintain a steady pace for as I round the pond in front of the meditation hall. There is a small bamboo forrest near the big bell, and I admire it swaying in the breeze. I feel an affinity for bamboo: it reminds me of [Kyoto](#), it is firm and flexible, Matambo's hut in [Swaziland](#) was constructed with it, it makes for good bowls, and as you sit under a forest the light shines in from many different angles. After it rains you can shake a branch and a torrent of rain comes down; the tiny leaves can hold much water.

5:30pm I make my way back to the linden tree, a large gathering spot for people coming to and fro. A friend from Norway has a guitar and another guy is drumming the bongos, there's even a flute player! At first it's some "Here comes the sun" and then we transition into a Plum Village song. There are about a dozen PV songs that everyone knows, and they instill a round-the-campfire mentality while also reminding us of why we are here. This is one called 'I have arrived' : "I have arrived. I am home. In there here. And in the now. I am solid, like a mountain. I am fresh, like the dew. In the ultimate I dwell. In the ultimate I dwell." There's a small group of us and we all smile as the sun paints serenity behind us. Upper Hamlet is on a hill (hence the name), so we have spectacular views of the countryside as it welcomes in the sunrise and sunset. As night falls the stars begin to shine, and the first star I spot I make a wish for internal peace.

6pm The dinner bell sounds and we make our way inside. Tonight there is steamed tofu, vegetables, brown rice, and some sweet soup. I take a small bowl, reminding myself that I can always get more if I am hungry. I sit down to eat and look around me.

6:15pm A bell chimes. Whenever the clock rings everyone stops and breathes; it is a bell of mindfulness. It's an amusing sight to see people mid-step and mid-sentence just kind of freeze, as if someone pressed pause on the movie that is my life. I return to my breathing and it occurs to me that I have about a dozen spoonfuls left of this delicious meal. I feel an uptick and my mood lifts; I make a mental note of this odd sensation of spontaneously feeling just that much better about what I'm doing, with absolutely no change in external circumstances. Across from me sits a couple of the monastics that I've gotten to know during my time here. One is from the UK and the other is half-Vietnamese half-Italian. The three of us are working on a project together that was funded by a SE Asian government to put mindfulness content on the web for youth. We had a brainstorming session last week, where we listed all the features we'd like to include: a searchable video database of all the Q&A session Thich Nhat Hanh has put on for the last 20 years. Country-specific web pages with all the mindfulness activities for youth happening in an event calendar. A place to submit your own content. The ideas were flowing. Online meditations coordinated globally. Basic instructions from meditation teachers delivered via Skype...during the meeting I was taking notes and smiling. My mind arrives back at the dinner

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table and the chopsticks in my hand and I smile again, reminded of how wholesome I feel. The brothers are speaking in French at the moment, and I marvel at how I've gotten so far in my life only knowing one language.

7pm After dinner I head back to my room and swing open the door with a triumphant "I'm home!" I have lived alone for the past year, so it's an enjoyable novelty for me to have people to greet in the evening. My American roommate from Montana is at the desk upstairs and greets me. I walk up the wooden stairs and slide into a spot near the bookshelf to bask in the post-dinner afterglow. There is some cheese being passed around; a rare sight in these parts. Montana is an environmental biologist, which from what I gather, has the prerequisites of sporting a big beard and knowing how to live off the land wherever you are. I feel a strong connection with him, and at 30 years of age he has served as a partial mentor to me. He is quite knowledgeable about Buddhism in general, having taken some Tibetan precepts, and as a fellow American we have a shared sense of culture. He's one of those people that every time we engage in deep conversation I walk away feeling I've learned something. This evening we arrive at the topic of perception; someone made a comment earlier about how they perceive there are, broadly speaking, two non-mutually-exclusive types of reasons people may come to communities like this. One is because of intense suffering they don't know what to do with, the other is intense curiosity and a quest for meaning. I comment that I place myself squarely in the second camp, and his response is "make sure you don't identify too much with the latter and deny the former. Unless you have no suffering, then that's wonderful, but I imagine that you do" It's that feeling of when you suddenly find that switch you'd been fumbling around in the dark for, and with a 'click' the entire room becomes illuminated: I realize in an instant that I have long denied my own suffering, believing that I needed to move past this inconvenience so that I could get on with the real work of awakening. This has resulted in a quiet self-torment that could have been a much softer blow had I learned to accept the fact that there are indeed times I suffer. It is at once so obvious and yet so elusive. The idea of acceptance is easy to understand as a concept, but when put into day-to-day practice it can be monumentally challenging. We then transition into a conversation about anger, and he mentions how "the great secret of this practice is that there are no secrets" In order to work on transforming anger, we must start with the small tedious unsexy day-to-day annoyances. Roommate leaves the light on in the bathroom. You miss the start of class by seconds and have to wait outside. Someone interrupts you when you are sharing. It is only after those are transformed that you can begin to untie the knots of anger over having witnessed 3rd world corruption or having parents who wanted you to be something other than what you were.

745pm The large bell is ringing, signaling it's time for our nightly sitting. The stars are shining and I take a minute before entering the meditation hall to breathe in the brisk winter air. Nightly sitting is usually much calmer for me than morning meditation, perhaps due to the nourishment of the day and the richness that accompanies these evenings. I find a cushion near the front and take a few deep breaths as I settle into my posture. I have been slowly getting back into yoga and I notice a slight difference in my sitting posture. I am able to sit for longer without pain, and my entire body feels a touch lighter. I'm feeling a loving kindness meditation, so I conjure up the imagine of myself, my parents, my close friends, everyone I know, everyone I've ever seen, everyone I've never seen, and then those who I find difficult. At each stage I wish them well, wish them safe from inner & outer dangers, wish them to be sound in body, heart and mind, and

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wish them to be peaceful & truly happy. When I conjure up images of friends there are always one or two people who suddenly pop out at me with a huge grin and wide eyes, as if to say "I'm here for you!"

After sitting we do 20 minutes of very slow walking mediation. We walk as if we were in slow-motion, noticing the ascent, swing, and decent of each foot in turn. I find that when I walk very slow it is very easy to lose my balance. I recognize how fortunate I am to not have to consciously think about how to walk; it's actually quite a complicated process. I look up and notice Thich Nhat Hanh is right in front of me. He is bearing a wide grin and looks like a child who is taking his first steps. In this moment everything seems so simple, and I feel flooded with peace in every step.

9:30pm I head back to my room quietly and feel the slow footsteps of a calm mind. I greet my roommates in silence as we all prepare to end the day. There are a few books I'm rotating reading, and tonight I pull out "Wherever you go, there you are". I read a short chapter entitled "Mountain Meditation", which talks about using a mountain as imagery for meditation: *"When it comes to meditation, mountains have a lot to teach, having archetypal significance in all cultures. Mountains are sacred places. People have always sought spiritual guidance and renewal in and among them...Rising above all else on our planet, they beckon and overwhelm with their sheer presence. Their nature is elemental, rock. Rock-hard. Rock-solid. Mountains are the place of visions, where one can touch the panoramic scale of the natural world and its intersection with life's fragile but tenacious rootings."* Reading this reminds me of a friend from home. I start thinking about my friends back at home, and how thankful I am for my friendships. I write a note in my Omnifocus app to email him with that quote next time I am at a computer. It's time for bed, and I sit still for a few moments just breathing.

The day is done.

Breathing out, I smile.