

Transitions

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Date : June 29, 2015



Whenever I meet someone new and tell them I lived at a monastery, I typically receive a combination of surprise and curiosity: "Wow, that's not something you hear everyday... what was that like?" A little while into our conversation, the topic usually arises of what it was like to leave the monastery and live in the "real world." Even for people who've never touched foot in a monastery, they can intuit that the transition from a contemplative environment into a city might not be easy.

They're right.

I have been in a unique position of transitioning in and out of contemplative settings frequently for the past four years and have become familiar with the unsettled feelings accompanying such a shift. I heard a monk once jokingly compare it to coming back from war! While we all found the comparison amusing, I think the challenges of any re-integration from a very specific way of living to another have some underlying commonalities.

In this writing I aim to investigate and communicate some of the challenges I've faced. In the

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years to come I think many people will take the leap to spend extended time at contemplative settings... and it is my hope that this writing will support them.

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Monasteries have been around for over 2,000 years for a reason: they work.

There is a daily schedule that everyone follows. This schedule varies by tradition, but many incorporate meditation practice and study, quality time with others, regular meals, necessary work, leisure time and rest.

There is also a set of precepts/guidelines that everyone agrees to live by. For the monastics (monks and nuns) this typically includes sexual abstinence, along with vows of not killing, stealing, speaking falsely and intoxication. Individual possessions are kept at a minimum, as most elements of life are communal (living spaces, food, vehicles, etc).

Lastly, monasteries are typically secluded and situated in nature, far away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

The schedule, precepts and seclusion allows for an environment in which the things that typically demand the majority of our time and attention in modern day life (i.e. decisions and distractions) are minimized in order for energy to be concentrated in other domains.

This environment is in stark contrast with the daily reality that most people reside in: a world full of decisions (where should I eat tonight? what will I do next weekend? when should I go to the gym?) and distractions (advertising everywhere, the internet instantly accessible, television and radio in restaurants, waiting rooms and most homes).

For most of the 2,000+ years of their existence, monasteries have been inhabited solely by monastics who are committed to a specific set of precepts for the rest of their life. Typically, this arrangement means one stays a monastery for the vast majority of their time. Recently, as interest in contemplative traditions grows in the west, there have been monasteries that also invite lay (non-monastic) persons to reside there for brief periods of time and practice with the monastics. And extremely recently, there are monasteries where lay people are invited to stay for a longer period of time, to essentially live within the monastic community.

It is within this most recent context that my time at monasteries has been spent over the past few years; an experiment that is a radical departure from the traditional model, one with much potential, and also, new challenges. Within this model I have benefitted tremendously, and my time spent at retreat centers has been illuminating, transformative, and lots of fun. (For details on my personal experiences living at monasteries, see writings on [Plum Village](#) and [Deer Park](#)).

Within this model I have also been challenged in many ways, most notably during the 'transition' phase from leaving a monastery to re-entering the world outside. Here I will share the primary challenges I've faced, alongside ways that I have practiced with them.

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1. Initial shocks of re-entry => Releasing expectations

When first exiting a contemplative setting after an extended stay, it's easy to put unrealistic expectations that one will be able to maintain a certain type of equanimity out in the world. (e.g. After my retreat I am now a "calmer person"). This perception can last a matter of weeks, days, or hours until one meets the inevitable reality that life is unpredictable and has a way of shattering expectations.

I recall coming back from my first visit to Plum Village, and needing to deal with selecting a car insurance company. There seemed to be so many choices, each company proclaiming that they were #1, and I found difficulty hearing my own voice among the chatter. I found the legal speak to be dense, and felt extra sensitive to agents trying to 'sell' me on something. Part of the decision included weighing the pros and cons of getting collision insurance, which involved me thinking through worst-case scenarios of if I got into a crash, how much coverage I wanted to pay for. Not very fun. After going back and forth among companies and coverage options I felt a bit overwhelmed, and then soon started criticizing myself for having a hard time with this. Hadn't I just spent 3 full months at a monastery devoting time to my ability to handle the difficulties of life? Where was my practice? This of course made me feel much worse.

After such a downfall it's easy for someone to beat themselves up thinking they have failed. In truth, the only thing that has failed is their expectations. With patience we see that the practice is not about ensuring a particular state of mind, it's about learning how to navigate the storms of our lives with wisdom and compassion. This takes time.

By cultivating a spaciousness for whatever one experiences it is easier to take in the bad, along with the good, and over time one is less phased by the inevitable ups and downs of everyday life.

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2. Meeting basic needs => Cultivating flexibility & determination

We are creatures of [habit](#). Good habits can enable fundamental needs to be consistently met, and habits are quite easy to follow when your environment is designed to support you in doing so.

When residing at the monastery I was able to consistently follow-through on habits that enabled meeting many of my most basic needs:

Sleeping well: 8-9 hours of sleep, waking up at the same time each day, and nap time.

Eating well: Three healthy meals at same time every day

Exercising regularly: an hour a day in the schedule, 5 days a week

Meditating regularly: at least an hour a day in the schedule, 6 days a week

When leaving the monastery these needs are much more difficult to meet. It took me a while to realize *discipline is not necessarily strengthened while living in structured environments*. It's extremely easy to meditate when there is scheduled time for it and everyone around you is

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doing it!

As a remedy I have had to employ a strong flexibility (accepting that my routine will never be as defined outside the monastery) and determination (If I don't make time for it, it often won't happen).

Operationally speaking, this typically means:

- Detailing out what is important for me to do each day and week
- Finding a community & partner who understands and supports my needs
- Protecting time for myself by doing less (i.e. saying "no" to some invitations)
- Taking naps

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3. Practicing during tough times => Creating space & seeking support

After adjusting back to life on the outside there are bound to be some really tough moments, as that's part of the human experience. Receiving support in these times can be challenging for a couple reasons:

1. There is less relative time available to stop and look deeply
2. There are likely less people in one's immediate environment to support

When residing in a contemplative setting, if something difficult arises internally it's easy to devote a substantial amount of time and energy to investigate: when at the monastery I could easily practice mindful breathing and walking for as long as I needed to in order to work through something. If I didn't want to talk to anyone for a day I could do so without it being seen as strange.

Then when I was ready to share, there were many people around who were available to support. These people were engaging in the same practices as I was and could offer perspective that aligned with my deep aspirations to be awake to my experience of life.

Outside the monastery, when something difficult arises its often in the midst of other activities. Most work environments do not allow for one to take a two-hour walk in the middle of the day to let off steam. Then when you do share with somebody, they may try and immediately offer advice, or worse yet, respond with the ever-so-helpful "That's nothing. One time I..."

This lack of space and support can further exacerbate a difficult situation. The remedy? A Sangha.

This can be in the form of a weekly sitting group where one goes regularly and knows he/she will have time to process and people to process with. This can also be in the home, creating a breathing room where one can go and be still, and a place where those one lives with understand his/her aspirations.

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A couple closing thoughts:

First, while it's helpful to make relative distinctions between the monastery and the 'real world' ultimately we must remember that it is the *internal environment* that determines well-being. Both the monastery and the outside world are simply laboratories to witness moment-to-moment experience. They have their own unique characteristics and some people prefer one to the other. I like both.

Second, transitions occur every day; in fact every second is a brand new experience looking to be understood and cared for. Sometimes there are more moving pieces than at other times, what one friend affectionately refers to as a "lumpy universe". During such times it can be more difficult to embrace change, but the fundamentals of practice remain the same: being open, curious, and accepting of one's experience enables appropriate and skillful responses. By staying grounded in your wisdom, and the wisdom of those around you, transitions can be manageable...even really lumpy ones.