

Sitting in a Cave . . . in New York City

Nancy Hathaway

Editor's note: We present here two reflections on practicing in a large city environment—one in New York on a retreat, and one in London, in an extended residency. Both writers are experienced students, coming to the city centers from other contexts, and we appreciate their sharing their experiences.

Walls. White walls. Two straight; three zigzagged. A brown wood floor. White walls. Brown floor. A statue of Buddha sits on the altar; nearby is a moktak—a hollowed out wooden drum used to keep a beat during chanting. Kwan Seum Bosal sits close by on the windowsill, holding us all with love and compassion. Photos and calligraphies of Korean Zen Master Dae Soen Sa Nim decorate the white walls, as well as paintings of his teachers and his students who have passed. On the floor, maroon mats and cushions face each other, or face the walls, depending on the activity of the moment and which direction the Zen practitioner is facing. One mat is different from the others, for Zen Master Wu Kwang, our teacher. This is our meditation cave for seven days and nights. Quiet, dark, warm. Sitting, walking, eating, sleeping, peeing, pooping, more sitting, more walking, eating, sleeping, peeing, pooping. In silence, I share this cave with others coming and going to and from jobs and life in the city.

Our meditation cave is in New York City.

I didn't mention the sixth wall, straight with windows. The windows look over a maze of metal restaurant ducts, two storeys above a closed-in courtyard, with four floors of apartment windows looking down toward the cave. Seven floors in all. Two below, then this one, and four above. No sign of nature for this Maine girl, unless I tilt my head and cheek just so while pressing against a window to look up the four stories to catch a glimpse of sky between roof lines. Gray sky. Sometimes blue. Sky, the only nature to be seen. Seven nights and days in a Zen retreat cave in New York City, with a peek of sky occasionally.

There *are* other options to only being in the cave for this week of meditation. We can walk to the farmers' market in Union Square during a late afternoon break, or ride the elevator to the rooftop to walk with views of tops of build-

ings. I choose to stay in the cave.

Why?

I need all the help I can get to cut down on mental distractions. Monks and nuns for centuries have gone to caves for meditation—to focus with few distractions. I am using this rare opportunity to see and study the mind. So, I make this choice to stay in the cave; otherwise, I'm eating chocolate at the little market on the corner or catching myself fantasizing about that red dress in the window, or that guy. It is much easier to study the mind against a backdrop of a white screen—in this case, white walls with only the mind feeding fantasies, thinking. The cave has been set up in a meticulous way so there are few excuses for worry, judging, thinking.

We are well fed, warm, dry, with a relatively comfortable sleeping pad on the floor. This is much easier than traveling thousands of miles to find a romantic cave in Asia.

Himalayan caves were sought after—and still are—for doing intensive three-year retreats. But this retreat is only for seven days. I can do it! Not wanting to take another 45-day trip traveling overland (or these days flying) to Nepal—where my very first meditation experience began 40 years ago in Kopan Monastery, home to Tibetan Buddhist teachers Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa—I

choose instead the easier route: Mega Bus to right here in the USA.

The romance of cave dwelling and finding a lama dressed in maroon robes, with Tibetan skin and eyes, sitting and not saying a word, chanting in an ancient language of earlier Buddhist times—I've done that. But New York City! A challenge. Maybe not for you, but for me. These walls are not romantic. And, of course, romance is not the point—I need to remember that.

The point is to spend time with myself. Finding a place to study the mind and to study what it means to be human. That's the point. Hanging out with what is. Why go to a cave in the Himalayas when sitting in NYC with a keen-eyed Zen master takes little time to get to and the travel is easy? Well, sort of easy. Coming from coastal rural Maine, living in an almost 200-year-old traditional farmhouse, standing in the center of the farmhouse looking out windows in four directions seeing only trees, stoking wood fires during the long



Photo: Nick Gershberg

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dark quiet winter months, snowshoeing to the compost pile, and quite often spending six hours shoveling in order to welcome guests is a way of life that takes getting used to. And leaving it takes getting used to also.

Traveling 10 hours by bus actually at times seems similar to traveling in Nepal. The Lucky Star going from Boston's Chinatown to New York's Chinatown isn't much different from traveling from Pokhara to Katmandu. No goats or ducks on this bus though; instead the distractions are movies with violence and sex. Is that the difference? The danger feels the same at times: not the fear of tumbling down cliffs on hairpin turns, but of being squeezed while speeding in and out of fast-moving cars and trucks over roads with bumpity-bump deep potholes. Seeing the city from the first look, my country eyes realize that what looks like the biggest ever hay storage silos one could possibly imagine are actually people houses stacked one on top of the other and side-by-side. Actually, this was a Maine joke in the seventies: "Farmer John goes to NYC and sees the biggest corn silos ever!" It was funny when I was a young teen not having been south of the border—the Maine border, that is.

These brown eyes from the coast of Maine begin to widen, with the whites becoming clear with beginner's mind, until soon enough I find myself sitting beside Zen Master Wu Kwang. He sits in full lotus posture quietly facing the gold Buddha, a gift from Zen Master Seung Sahn bringing Zen from Korea. Zen Master Wu Kwang's body appears not to move when sitting. Of course, he doesn't sit the whole time: he too sits and walks and sits and walks, and eats, and sleeps,

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and pees and sits and walks and bows 108 times each morning. He doesn't talk except in one-on-one student-teacher meetings held twice a day. No discourses on fancy Buddhist teachings. Only right now, we are encouraged and supported to keep *clear mind, clear mind, clear mind, don't knooooow-wwww . . .* a before-thinking place. The *hwadu* is its name. Only question. Not questioning from the intellect but with every cell of his body, he watches the layers of mind make everything, all the while inquiring "What is this?" Before thinking, before opinions, before judgments, before anything, and even before that.

If you are looking for pure expression, for the essence of true human original nature, and are willing to let go of the romance of Asian culture, you can sit in a cave in your own backyard right here in the United States, in New York City, with a bright-eyed Zen master who will look you in the eye and ask you, "What are you doing just now?" And, if you know what you are doing, he will hit you 30 times (a Zen expression). If you say "I don't know" he will also hit you 30 times. So what can you do? Ahh . . . Cheek pressed against the cool window; blue sky turning into night sky, with city lights twinkling. ♦

Nancy Hathaway became a senior dharma teacher in 1984, while a resident at Providence Zen Center from 1979 to 1985, where she served in a number of temple positions. Living with her husband at PZC, Nancy gave birth to her two sons at home. Then she practiced for 15 years at the Cambridge Zen Center. Currently Nancy offers mindfulness courses at colleges, hospitals, schools, and privately. She is a licensed pastoral counselor. Her essays on mindful parenting have been published in anthologies, including *The Best Buddhist Writing 2006* (Boston: Shambhala Publications). Nancy lives on the coast of Maine.

Morning Bell Reverberates Throughout the Universe:

Notes on a Residency at the London Zen Centre

Pedro Dinis Correia

Living in a Zen center in the heart of London is a wonderful and tough experience. This is the perspective of a residency of five and a half months, all while keeping a full-time job.

Daily Practice

Bowing (108 bows). Such a simple movement, yet I found it effective in calming the mind and making the body fit

and healthy.

Sitting meditation. I was used to sitting meditation, and it was great to have long periods of sitting in silence.

Chanting. It took me a while to get used to it, but it brought great moments of beauty and synchronicity. It's a wonderful practice to chant together in a group for someone in need, like we did for a friend of mine who was going through a tough moment in her life.