

# On Living in a Zen Center

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If you had mentioned to me three years ago that I would enjoy waking up before dawn to do bows and meditate, I likely would have called you a fool. Thankfully, I do not need to do so. Waking up before dawn to do bows and meditate is still a miserable time, even after several years of doing it. Yet it is one of several practices that I have committed to since moving into the Orlando Zen Center, and one that I have found quite useful. This article attempts to describe my experience living in a Zen center and why I remain here. What I can certainly say is that living in a Zen center is both one of the strangest and most ordinary experiences in my life thus far, especially considering that I live in an atypical Zen center.

There's a way in which Zen centers in the Kwan Um School have come to resemble the all-important temple-monastery in Korea. The Zen center, like the temple-monastery, provides first a place to live for those who wish to sincerely practice Zen. For those who do not inhabit the Zen center, it further provides a place to conduct Zen ceremonies and practice outside the commitment of living there. As opposed to the temple-monasteries in Korea, however, our Zen centers are predominantly inhabited by laypeople, who often conduct practice in the morning and evening and then leave for work during the day. They are often joined at practice by other members of the sangha who live elsewhere.

The Orlando Zen Center provides this same function, one that I have become quite familiar with in my several years of living here. We offer practice every single day in some form, and many individuals travel from across the city—and sometimes across the state for special retreats—to practice in this space. This is and always will be my predominant experience of the Orlando Zen Center: it is a space of practice.

Practice, in all its shapes—chanting, bowing, sitting, walking, and so on—can always seem strange. Weird things come up, parts of us that maybe we don't like, which we hide from or we push away. Other times, practice can be a relaxing experience, allowing the stressors of my days at the office to settle down. Yet more often than not, practice can feel like an inconvenience, taking up several hours of my day from things I think I would rather be doing. While others can go home, or avoid coming to practice if they do not live here, as someone who lives in a Zen Center I am committed to showing up for every practice as much as I am able.

If I had a nickel for every time I groaned on my way home from work in anticipation of setting up cushions, making the tea, and spending an hour to an hour and a half chanting and sitting instead of doing literally anything else, then I could pay off my student loans. This experience of encountering desire and aversion is key to Zen, and is one of the things that I have come to cherish about living here.

By designating the space as a place for Zen, and by providing a structure to it, I am forced to practice with the parts of me that don't want to do something. I am forced to sit quietly with my mind that would rather play video games or read, or go out to eat. I am forced to sit with the parts of me that find this whole thing, and myself, just weird, uncomfortable, and inconvenient. By doing so, I can gain some insight into the nature of my own aversion and desire, and the fundamental emptiness of it. Ultimately, I can try to get a little bit better at learning to live with that, rather than let it dictate my life.

I live here. This is what I call the “ordinary” experience of living here. As much as it is a place of practice, it is also my home. I have a room with a bed, and my clothes. I use the bathroom to shower and prepare to go to work. I cook and prepare meals in the kitchen (vegetarian of course). And yet, none of it is mine. I live here, yes, but as I live here people show up. Sometimes they show up in droves, sometimes just a few; sometimes expected, and sometimes not. These people show up, walk into the kitchen, use the same bathroom and so forth. It is a home in which people are always coming and going, practicing and chatting. It is a place where I reside and live, and it is all here for one purpose: to support Zen and the sangha who practice it. This too, is something I have come to appreciate. I am learning not only to live and put aside my own ego in the face of a structure and place of practice, but also to practice and welcome those who come up in the place where I live. I learn to take care of things not just for myself but for everyone. In short, the experience of living in a Zen center helps me learn to live with people, and helps me to learn to live *for* other people. It is one way of practicing the great question, “How can I help?”

This practice is not always easy. I am an introvert, and more so I am an easily irritated one. Ask any of my coworkers. People showing up can feel draining, especially when they are unexpected, and I often don't feel like I have the capacity of will to patiently, kindly and generously instruct

people and show them around. I recall one Monday evening when someone showed up thinking we had practice (we did not) and I found them standing in the middle of the dharma room as I walked out of the bathroom. Needless to say, I was uncomfortable.

By confronting me with these situations, living in a Zen center confronts me with the parts of me I find difficult to witness in many of the same ways that formal practice does. This, I think, is an experience typical for many who engage in communal practice—especially communal living—and is key to the purpose of a Zen center. The Zen center unites the ordinary experience of my life with the strange experience of consistent Zen practice, and the two interpenetrate on a level I have found to be profoundly eye opening but often uncomfortable. This is something that all of our sangha practices, and is something I continue to do as well.

Where my experience differs slightly from others', however, is that our Zen center is atypical. First, it is fairly small compared to others I have visited. The Orlando Zen Center contains a dharma room that can hold at most fifteen people, a tea room, a kitchen, a bathroom and two bedrooms. This means that at any given time, only two residents can inhabit the Zen center, as opposed to the several dozen living in larger Zen centers. Living with only two people, as opposed to a group of people, can limit the amount of “ego bumping” that comes from communal living. Rather than living communally, it is more so like having a housemate.

In my time of living here, I have lived with two other residents, both of whom have supported my practice and the Zen center, and both of whom have confronted me with aspects of myself—flaws I had never before noticed—that I had to learn to put aside in order to live harmoniously with others.

Zen Master Seung Sahn described how, in Korea, potatoes would be washed by putting them in a pot of water and stirring them with a stick so they all rub up against each other until the dirt came off. Likewise, living and practicing with other people in a Zen center, with egos and lifestyles bumping up against each other, can eventually reveal each person's true self, and also how to live with it. This is a beautiful experience that I cherish deeply. I cherish those who have lived with me in the Zen center, who have been my teachers, and showed me my flaws. Communal living in any Zen center is a strong practice, and it is something we offer here at the Orlando Zen Center. I would recommend this experience to anyone who has the time, ability and dedication to undertake it.



Photo: Scott Martin

I end with a quote by Shozan Jack Haubner, who describes the experience of communal practice better than I ever could:

I used to imagine that spiritual work was undertaken alone in a cave somewhere with prayer beads and a leather-bound religious tome, the holy one enwrapped in a mist of grace, mystique, and body odor. Nowadays, that sounds to me more like a vacation from spiritual work. Group monastic living has taught me that the people in your life don't get in the way of your spiritual practice; these people *are* your spiritual practice.

Through each other we discover that if we have the heart—the willingness, the strength, the courage—we have the capacity to plant the seeds of kindness, compassion, forgiveness, seeds of a laid-back humor, a sense of letting go. But your heart must be quicker than your mind. Trust me, that organ between your ears is always spoiling for a fight. Its job is to divide and conquer. But the real fight is taking place inside you, within the “dharma organ,” the heart, where the challenge is to unify and understand, where the seeds of love and compassion are struggling to lay roots, to gain ground.\*

To that, I can only say amen. ♦

**Note**

\* From Shozan Jack Haubner, *Zen Confidential: Confessions of a Wayward Monk* (Boston: Shambhala, 2013), 169–70.

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