

Inside and Outside: Spending the Past Year at Musangsa

Matt Jiang

“Maybe practicing at Musangsa Temple for a year will give me more peace and confidence.” I journaled these words in August 2019 on my one-way flight to Seoul, as I reflected on what I was getting myself into. I had just graduated from university without a job or sense of direction. All I knew was that I wanted to deepen my meditation practice. Talking to sangha members at Cambridge Zen Center, I learned it was possible to live and practice full-time at Musangsa, the head temple of the Kwan Um School in Korea. I hoped to gain some clarity after a difficult college experience left me unsettled and confused. So I made the unorthodox decision to spend one year at Musangsa. These past twelve months as I sat silently inside the temple’s dharma room, in a Zen oasis, the entire world outside entered a new period of suffering and uncertainty. Now back home in the United States, I reflect on my experience.

When I first arrived at Musangsa, the sunims (monastics) happily welcomed me into their lives. Every day we would wake up at 4 a.m. for morning meditation and go to sleep at 9 p.m. after evening meditation. During the day, we would do work around the temple and eat prepared meals together. After adjusting to the daily schedule, I soon felt at home. But somehow even in this tranquil outside environment, I did not have a peaceful mind inside. As I became more aware through practice, I noticed more and more of my deluded thinking. I obsessed over trivial problems in the temple like whether my laundry had enough time to dry. I recognized how often I was silently judging and getting angry at other people. On top of everything, I felt like a bad practitioner for having these thoughts. Even my motivation to practice, to relieve my own suffering, came under fire as I learned correct direction means practicing for all beings. “Why am I so selfish? I don’t have correct direction!”

I sat all three months of winter Kyol Che, continuing to wrestle with my karma and my reactions to my karma. Though our teachings are wonderful, they can become hindrances if you become attached to them. I felt like I had to keep a clear mind and know my correct function all the time, otherwise I was doing something wrong. With guidance from our teachers, I recognized that all of this is just thinking. Rather than being concerned about taking the correct action or keeping the correct state of mind, just put it down.

After winter Kyol Che ended in February, I heard for the first time about a novel virus killing people in China. In the next few months, COVID-19 spread and wreaked havoc on almost every country in the world. Meanwhile at the temple, already quarantined from society, we just continued our schedule of work and meditation. I had the feeling of being in a remote bunker in the middle of an apocalypse. I was in some artificially quiet inside world—like a dharma room—while the outside world was on fire.

But this dharma room is important. It helps us train the real inside world—our minds—so that we can better handle whatever situation appears in the outside world.

Soon it was summer Kyol Che, and I used the opportunity to keep a very tight practicing schedule. Miraculously, as I kept trying and letting go of my checking mind, a little bit of self-acceptance appeared. I could say “I’ve seen this kind of thinking before. Now, what am I doing?” and suddenly my karma was no longer a big deal. My inside world grew more resilient. This relief also came with more empathy for others’ suffering and a greater desire to help.

Finally, a year had passed and I left Musangsa to return to civilian life. I am now faced with more pressures and complex situations than during my idyllic year at the temple. I have to manage relationships, find a job, and make difficult decisions. Some people have to deal with even more devastating loss and hardship because of the pandemic. To be honest, I still often find my inside world in turmoil, pulled around by things in my outside world. But as much as I can, I take a deep breath, put it down, and ask myself, “Who is thinking these thoughts?” Then, if I am upset from being stuck at home with family, sometimes the anger disappears and I just see what’s in front of me. I’m grateful to at least have a home and people to share it with. Or if I am obsessing over details like which pair of headphones to buy, maybe I relax and see the unimportance of it all. If I am unsure how to help someone, I can try something without being too attached to the outcome. And sometimes if I am stuck on what seems like a big decision, like what career to pursue, I might realize that thinking more about it will only give me a headache. Even if I decide to go down one path, there’s no way of knowing how life will unfold. The only thing we can know with certainty is what we are experiencing right here, right now.

Zen gives us a path to cope and help with life’s suffering. I had a unique opportunity to live at Musangsa for a year. But wherever we are practicing—in a temple or on our cushion at home—the reason for cultivating our inside world is so we can more wisely respond to whatever happens in our outside world. What is wise, what is correct? Sometimes we don’t know, and the only answer is to keep on just doing it. When you just do it 100 percent, then what is outside and what is inside? Just reading this article! ♦

Matt Jiang is a recent college graduate from the United States. He first started meditating with a phone app recommended by his therapist, before beginning to practice with the Kwan Um School at Cambridge Zen Center. He hopes everyone keeps a strong practice, finds peace and happiness, and saves all beings.