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# Sleeping Amidst the Monks

## Leaving the Tourist Trails for Thailand's Temples

Fri, 11/30/2012

"Oh, no no no...not what we do here." The elder monk said, completely rejecting my request while never breaking his full, enlightened smile.



By Johnny Early

I felt gutted. I had spent the entire day renting a scooter and getting lost through the winding and poorly labeled mountainside that overlooks Chiang Mai. The end to my quest: the happiest dismissal possible.

After nearing my second month of backpacking South East Asia, I was in need of a reset. Through the grapevine I had heard of a Buddhist Wat (temple), nearby the Northern Thailand city of Chiang Mai, that will allow visitors to stay overnight for several nights as long as they respect their traditional ways. After several years of practicing meditation, a few classes studying eastern religion and a growing tire of the beaten tourist trails, I was ready to jump in head first for a few nights.

“Not what we do here. No, no.” The elder monk continued.  
“...but...down *there* they may help you.” He said pointing down some weathered, stone stairs that led to a small cluster of houses confined by the surrounding jungle.

This time both of us were smiling contently.  
“Kap koon krup.”



*The Tunnels of Wat Umong, built to keep busy a mentally deranged monk [Photo - J. Early]*

As it turns out there was a small meditation center a short walk below the actual Monastery, set up by volunteers and some of the monks. For a small donation they will feed you, give you a room and white clothes to wear during your minimum three-night stay. Adherence to the meditation practice schedule and Buddhist lifestyle is mandatory.

At first it sounded like a perfect intake of culture while on a vacation from the backpacking travels. It soon became evident how difficult such a drastic lifestyle adjustment would be.

“These are the keys to your room. We will see you tomorrow morning at 4am.”

Whoa.

Walking up to my room, I was still processing the times that month I had arrived home at four versus the times I had woken up at four a.m. (about 8 – 0). I opened the door to reveal my room and bed for the duration of my stay: It was the equivalent of a welcome mat in an empty closet.

The vacation was over before it started.

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Evidently this was guest luxury, the monks often do not use a pillow [Photo - J. Early]

The following days involved early mornings, quiet reflection and the constant attempts to turn off my busy, western mind. There were four other 'students', from around the world, staying and practicing meditation. One middle-aged man from Eastern Europe had been here for over two months.

We would wake by 4am and have scheduled meditation throughout the day from 5am to 9pm. A different monk would accompany us at the end of each day to give us a lesson to reflect on for the following wake. Sometimes it was an open discussion, other times just one or two spoken words to consider for the rest of the day.



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*The Wat Umong Temple dates back to 1297, built during the Lan Na dynasty [Photo - J. Early]*

Here are few things I learned from my time with the monks:

- When meditating, it is considered rude to point your feet in the direction of a monk
- If you are having trouble staying focused during your fifth hour of meditation, you might be allotted to walk from one tree to another that is 20 feet away...with a minimum 30-minute interval to do so
- You are not to eat anything after your last meal of rice at noon
- Do not eat your rice before the monks at the front of the room have started
- Always sit and keep silent when eating or drinking\*
- \*During some spare time I planned to explore the jungle monastery with a cup of tea to which a monk saw me and remarked: *'Why you walk AND drink? If you need to drink...sit, drink. Enjoy the tea. Why make yourself so busy?'*



*Koh Phangan mornings with the keeper of Wat Khao Tham [Photo - J. Early]*

My favorite lesson came from a young monk who knew very little English. He held up a piece of paper and a pencil:

*"This...me...before meditation."* He started motioning to the pencil in front of the paper.  
*"I see. [pointing to the front of the paper] Here, no see. [pointing to the back]"*  
*"After...meditation...I see AND I see."* He smiled pointing to both sides of the paper.



### LISTENING STATION





Enlightening reminders of non-permanence along Wat Umong [Photo - J. Early]

The monks offer such simple lessons for a simplified life.

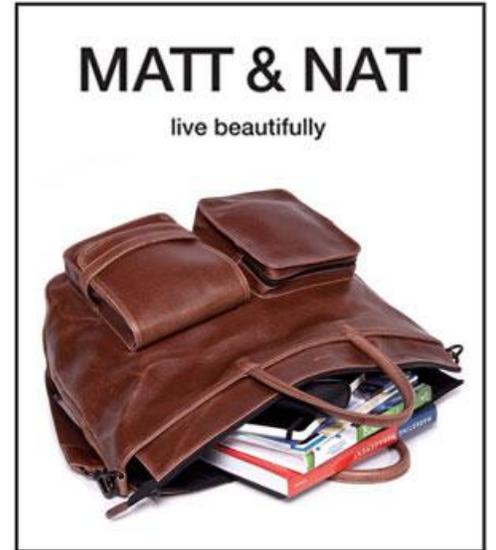
We often forget how applicable and needed such simplicity is to our modern life. A society of extended work hours and multi-tasking to proliferate 'better, faster, stronger' for richer...what?

Even after I thought I left that society behind to backpack Asia, the traveler's need to 'do it all' and 'cram it all in' sometimes felt more apparent than working life at home.

If you find yourself among the many visitors to Thailand each year, take the time to understand a lifestyle different than your own besides taking a picture of it. The Wat Umong Meditation Center might be the very place you find the stillness to appreciate the motion of travel.

~john.e~

Here are a few clips in my attempt at living the simplicity of the SE Asian lifestyle:





Chasing The Sun: ~Bali & Thailand~

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