

# Letter from Myanmar

Jessica Lam Hill Young

The Panditarama Forest Meditation Center in Myanmar is a place without past or future. I am one of 125 foreigners from 24 countries who took part in Panditarama's 60-day silent meditation retreat from December to January. Each morning, the bass-like "thump . . . thump . . . thump . . ." of the wooden drum sounds for 15 minutes at 3 a.m. One by one, the yogis – wearing the brown *longyis* and white blouses required of all female meditators – emerge from their *kutis* (meditation huts) with flashlights, walking step by mindful step on the hard, sun-baked dirt to the meditation hall. This is where we spend nearly 14 of our waking hours every day.

Meditation is from 3:30 a.m. to 5 a.m. Breakfast is from 5 to 6. After breakfast, we sit from 7 a.m. to 8 a.m., do walking meditation for an hour, and sit again until lunchtime at 10:15 a.m. Lunchtime's ritual never varies: line up (nuns in front, newcomers in back). Pick up sandals, and unfurl umbrellas for the heat of the midday sun. File out in a single line, and begin the 15-minute journey to the dining hall. We keep our gaze downward, blind to shimmering ponds and lush greens, deaf to the sounds of wildlife. Guarding our senses prevents the thoughts that arise from what we see, hear and feel around us. Thinking is not encouraged at Panditarama. We are urged, instead, to observe each moment as it unfolds without mental commentary and to live currently in the most visceral sense.

After lunch, we alternate sitting and walking meditation through the hottest part of the day, with a brief break for a glass of juice. We meditate and fast into the cooler hours of the evening. After chanting the *metta sutta*, we call it a day at 9:15 p.m. There is no dinner. On my more difficult days I think of the movie *Groundhog Day*, about a man who inexplicably finds himself reliving the same day of his life again and again.

My life is measured in hours: specifically

by a musical clock that chimes the Westminster tune every hour to signify the end of a meditation session. It brings immeasurable relief, because insight meditation is a bit like holding your breath: it takes willpower to ignore all other thoughts and focus only on breath. I sit on my *zafu*, inside a circular island of mosquito netting, legs crossed, back erect, eyes closed. I focus on the sensations of the abdomen. Rising, falling. Rising, falling.

But on the inside, turbulent emotions and physical sensations clamor for exclusive attention. An itch becomes as excruciating as a hot iron brand, heat becomes intolerable instead of merely uncomfortable, and irritation can turn into blinding rage. The trick is to calm the

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靈魂那麼好拯救  
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mind, like soothing a baby: it's okay, it's alright . . . Then bring the mind back to the meditation object. Again, and again.

It isn't easy. Sometimes I hug my knees and watch the clock's second hand creep forward, teeth clenched, soaked in sweat, willing the clock to strike. We are discouraged from getting up during sitting meditation until the clock strikes. Other times, the hour flies by.

There is only one rule to thrive at an intensive insight meditation retreat: Present Moment, Present Object. My teacher, a grim-looking, smooth-faced Burmese monk, reminds me of that every interview (along with "calm your mind!"). Life at Panditarama is the continuous practice of bringing full attention to this very second again and again, impartially observing the mind and body. When the voices of discontent clamor – what is the point of this? I'm hungry. I'm sleepy. My leg hurts. It's hot. This is too much for me, maybe I should go home – I ask

myself one question: what am I doing this second, right now? Am I on the toilet? Raising a foot to take a step? Bringing a forkful of food towards my mouth? Very good. Focus on that, and don't think about anything else.

This is the way to practice at Panditarama. Forget everything. Forget who you are, how you feel, the aches and agitation, the worries and problems of home. Practice with no regard to this life or any other lives. Practice as if the fate of the entire universe hinges on this one step, this one bite of food.

I started meditating to manage panic attacks. Trying out mindfulness techniques was like dipping my toes in the ocean to test the waters, only to find myself engulfed in the waves. Meditation becomes a way of life. The more I practice coming back to the present moment and present object, the less anxious I am. I have come to understand that, except for the present moment, I really have no control over anything in this life. Nothing is certain, except for birth, death and aging, so why worry? Clarity and wisdom arise from whole-hearted attention to this moment as it is.

Like Phil Connors in *Groundhog Day*, what seems like a punishment at first is a disguised lesson in self-love and persistence. Self-love, because choosing to let pain go is an act of compassion for the self. On my last day I watch the sun rise in brilliant shades of orange and violet over the lotus pond. A young Burmese girl with *thanaka* (a cosmetic paste) smeared on her cheeks balances my suitcase on her head and carries it to the waiting jeep. I feel my heart burst with happiness and gratitude, with love and beauty for this life. If I can practice 14 hours of formal meditation a day in a Myanmar monastery for 60 days, I am ready to face anything. ☐

Jessica Lam Hill Young recently graduated from Boston University with a BA in English literature and journalism. She has written for the *South China Morning Post*, *Pittsburgh City Paper*, *HK Magazine* and various campus literary journals.

