

In the Monk's Cell

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As a monk dedicated to the path of material simplicity and sense-stilled peace I've lived in many monk's cells. They were never bigger than 10 feet by 10 feet square. Often, smaller. I know the hundred square feet of my rooms as if it is the perfect golden square, the perfect harmony of height, width and depth, a cube cookie-cutting the psychic universe into the subatomic physics of our universe. Always that space of a hundred square feet, wherever I encounter it, makes me feel at home and rooted. It could be a home's guest room, a small hotel room or a dirt-floor hovel on a Nepali pilgrimage route—I resonate to the hundred square feet.

Some of the cells I occupied for many years were river stone and smoothed concrete floors. Some were pinewood and planked floors, some simply unpainted concrete block with rough-hewn concrete floors and tropical louvered windows. One cell was a wood-paneled room with blue carpet and a small fireplace for the alpine zone winters, but nothing else. Some cells were shared with other brothers: small apartment rooms with odd Victorian angles, quiet grey carpet and windows on San Francisco Presidio area streets often enshrouded in grey fog.

And one was not a room in the traditional sense, but a space for meditation, study and sleep: 3 feet wide, 8 feet long and 4.5 feet high with a peaked ceiling. It looked like a small train caboose, or another design was as a miniature chalet, raised on stilts about 2.5 feet off the ground, with windows that were simply screened to keep the tropical bugs out. That was my favorite abode and I lived in this kind of cell for over 10 years. Some of these cells had electricity for light and a little space heater to ward off wintry chills or a fan for swampy heat. Most did not. I lived in cells for twenty years without electricity for light or cooling. I got very used to, and very ingenious, in dealing with sapping cold and dripping heat. None had furniture, save the concrete block cell that had a single dresser for robes and clothes. No bed. No bed stand. No table nor chairs. There was a slightly elevated wood platform for sleeping, with a pillow and futon.

The intent of a monk's cell, one would think, would be quiet. A space cut off from the traffic of the world and conversations of other people. But it is really not that. For monks' cells are not that quiet. They can be in noisy neighborhoods, or be in areas of a monastery that abound with the normal sounds of monks at work or speaking or relaxing with laughter. Then, there are the intrusive noises of nature around your cell, including an amazing array of loud insects, species of kawing or shrieking birds, rats gnawing on wood or scurrying around in the brush or fighting, the very creepy sound of long centipedes crawling nearby (a very distinct 100-leg sound), wild pigs, stray dogs and the most noisy creature on earth: the hen with a brood of chicks.

There are, of course, the comforting and symphonic natural sounds that surround a cell in the woods: Beethoven-like bird song in major and minor scales, the bass to flute tones of breezes and winds, tree trunks creaking and branches rubbing, the gentle hum of bees.

The intent of a monk's cell is interior quiet and peace, quietness and centeredness inside yourself and the "peace beyond understanding" that fully permeates you in the confines of the cell and the expansion of universal self in rumination or meditation. The cell is small to cultivate a sense of simple living, of sacred energy condensed, of bleached bones spareness of things, of the small measure of space a man or woman truly needs to live fully in life and spirit. And there is the aloneness. Not loneliness. But being alone unto the universe of one's self: physically, emotionally, psychically, spiritually. The unending privacy of a space

only you enter. It is like a planetarium, the fabulous star shows projected onto a large curving dome. And I've actually experienced this several times psychically: seeing my cell's ceiling completely open up to the more refined astral planes.

I first stepped into my own monk's cell when I was nineteen years old. It wasn't really a cell in the traditional perception of a monk's quarters: a small stone room with an arched door and pinched windows. It was an old Hawaiian dairy barn that had been converted to a work barn, then re-converted to sleeping quarters for young novices. It was painted dark brown, and had a high tin metal roof, also dark brown, with air-flow spaces at the ceiling/roof and large open doors that were always open. Basically an open air barn so there was no hope of protection from mosquitoes, bees, flies, gnats, bats and a couple of hundred other winged species. The monastery laundry, consisting of two huge, yellow washing machines and dryers, were right next to us. I fell asleep often to the rolling, tumbling sounds of those machines clunking away at all hours of day and into the night. The room wasn't split into cells with dividing walls, but simply divided by the fact your sleeping space on the floor was defined by a futon and pillow and a little area for clothes and books and a personal altar, all very low to the ground. To me, though there were two other young men in other areas of the barn, it was a cell, my first monk's quarters. There was a woven basket with plumeria and hibiscus flowers and papaya, bananas and star fruit waiting for me on the folded futon. I deeply savored the tiny space, and felt immensely liberated in its tightly circumscribed space. And that is the irony (or the inverse square law) of the monk's quarters. The smaller the cloister, the more liberated the spirit. I spent a year in that barn, in the same small rectangle of space, taking care of my clothes, drying myself after a shower, rising in the predawn darkness, studying by candle light, meditating and praying in a yoga-sitting posture for long hours, escaping the sleeping body into the higher dream world through that small, sacred rectangle that I kept flawlessly clean and imbued with a young monk's love of the simple and harmonious.

The cell I loved most was the most simple. It was called a hut. I called it the Swiss Chalet hut, shaped like a very small chalet with peaked roof (to shed the incessant rains of our Kauai, Hawaii, locale) that one crawled into through a door less than three feet high. It was like the tube sleepers in Japan airports. You literally crawled in on your knees, after removing your sandals outside, cleaning your feet, bustling up your robes and stepping up two wooden steps. You learned to quickly slide back the door's bolt, swing the door open with lightening speed and crawl/jump into the spare futon mattress that was right at the edge of the door. The idea was not to let the mosquitoes in. The little chalet was made entirely of redwood and sat on stilts off the ground to bring its screened windows up to the trade winds that during certain seasons would be a cooling blessing of delicious comfort.

The chalet was eight feet long and three feet wide, and about 4.5 feet high at the peak of its roof. Screened windows ran the full length of the long sides and were over two feet high, coming down to just above where your body lay when you were sleeping. Screens were also punched high in the front and back walls of the hut. The affect was to allow as much of the air flow through, and especially the trade winds when they were up. The stronger Kona winds from the south in winter would blow against the hut's sturdy door, and tropical storm force winds would literally rock the hut like a pitching boat. The chalet hut was placed by itself in a thick forest of very tall swamp mahogany with heavy, brittle branches, rainbow eucalyptus and allspice trees. A camphor tree was also nearby. The aromas kicked up by breezes and stirred by temperature rises were rarified in softness, relaxing to a wearied body and acted as a sleeping incense as I lay in the tropical purpley darkness. I never burned incense out there. Partly because you didn't need it. And partly because it was a monastery rule not to burn incense in the huts. There were about six of these huts scattered around 20 acres of property. One evening smoke and the just-starting orange tendrils of flame were coming out of one of the caboose-type huts and several of us ended up racing at full gallop for fire extinguishers and heading

back to the hut in offroad small vehicles to spray it down with foam. The hut came through fine and was easily repaired, and it was determined unattended incense had been the cause.

On the right side of the hut was a box frame for two shelves that stored my books, citronella mosquito repellent (a constant companion wherever I traveled), rosary beads, a small meditation altar, a lighter, strands of a mop for wicks and a bottle of vegetable oil. There was no electricity in any of our huts or cells. No lights. No fans. I didn't miss the electric lights. I did miss the fans. Rather than candles we used oil lamps, dipping a thick wick into vegetable oil, learning how to place it in an upright position so it would burn brightly for hours and not slip into the oil. They made little smoke, but one of the occasional chores was to clean the hut and screens of oil soot. I would read and study philosophy, metaphysics, stories of exceptional spiritual people and circumstances, history and science—the flickering light of the oil lamp casting deep shadows throughout this small enclosure while the entire sounds of the forest in its evening-into-night phase came in in pure stereo through the left and right screens.

To be continued.

