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David Chang
Simon Fraser University, dave_chang@sfu.ca

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A Forest in the City: Contemplative Practice for Difficult Times

David Chang

Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University, Canada

Abstract

Keywords

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In this short narrative-essay, David Chang presents what he learned after spending a year in contemplative solitude on a remote off-grid island along the coast of BC, offering “invitations to live the stillness of the forest in the bustle of the city”. Chang makes the case that those blessed with the time and resources to practice contemplative solitude have an (educational) commitment to share these lessons and insights with broader society, arguing that “Contemplation becomes insignificant if it cannot address the pressing problems of our day”.

Corresponding author. Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University, Canada.

E-mail address: dave_chang@sfu.ca.

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In the fall of 2017, I moved to a remote off-grid island along the coast of British Columbia. This retreat was a culmination of several forces in my life: a concern over my complicity in the ecological crisis, a love of wild and rugged landscapes, and a longing for contemplative solitude. Through the course of a year, I watched the movement of the seasons, the chill of autumn seeping through bark and bracken, winter storms stirring columns of snow, the chorus of tree frogs in spring, and the clacking song of crickets in summer. I basked in the deep silence of the land in long hours of meditation, sitting in the dark, nothing visible but the glowing fire from the stove. I tasted the sweetness of days unsaddled by duty – a stillness unmolested by commotion. From the vantage of a small cabin, I found an axis from which to witness my own unfolding and the convulsions that rocked the tumultuous world.

Since my return from the island, many people have expressed curiosity about my experience. They want to know what I learned. “Give me the 90 second version,” they tell me. At first, I was not prepared to collapse the experience into an elevator pitch. Averse to the kitsch and common, I thought that to reduce a year’s reflections is to discount both the land’s manifold teachings and the fullness of my experience. Upon further consideration, I came to see the distillation of insight as a continuing assignment borne of the land’s tutelage, an effort that brings its lessons to completion. My own understanding is burnished by making the abstract concrete and the mystical accessible. After all, my retreat was made possible by a wider community who believed it wise to invest in my venture. Thus, it remains an act of fidelity to society that I share the fruits of my experience with all who cannot directly partake in solitude. What good is contemplative solitude, with all its espoused virtues of simplicity and sanity, if it remains a private paradise for the few, if it cannot offer to others an iota benefit? Inner poise comes easily to those who live in the silence of the grove, but such sanctuary remains elusive for others who must toil in the streets. Contemplation becomes insignificant if it cannot address the pressing problems of our day. The responsibility of the seeker, who travels far to find what is near, lies in showing others the gem beneath the film of all that appears ordinary.

For readers interested in the 90 second elevator pitch, this brief essay presents the essence of what I learned from my year in the woods and offers invitations to live the stillness of the forest in the bustle of the city. For those of us who cannot escape our commitments to indulge in a contemplative excursion, the following reflections point to the oases found under our very noses, the opportunities for stillness and awakening in the common hours of each day. The munificence of land and waters are ever present, and the goodness of earth extends even to the grimy corners of the city. Everywhere we go, we live under the embrace of the vast sky. One need not travel far to discover the face of suchness, the inimitable beauty of each fleeting moment.

Stillness is never absent—recognize and accept its subtle invitations

City life is marked by movement and bustle. Traffic and construction fill the soundscape with din. Yet, amid such frenetic activity, there are invitations to stillness. I have learned to appreciate the act of waiting, those fragments of duration interspersed throughout the day. I wait for the light at the crosswalk, wait to order coffee, wait to pay for groceries. I began to savour these occasions while waiting at the bus stop. I take a moment to savour the cool morning air, the rays of sun breaking between edifice and glass, the trees turning in the seasons. I observe the colour of the sky, the smearing of cloud overhead. I soften my shoulders and return to the spacious present. There is a quiet pleasure in waiting, poised in the space between contentment and anticipation. Waiting is not an ineluctable suspension that we are

forced to abide by; it is the fullness of time revealing itself between our preoccupations. In waiting, I find a subtle invitation to relish the moments that will never come again. There is nowhere else to be, nothing else to do except to bask in the marvel of all that is ordinary. If the swift passage of time disquiets the soul, the pauses occasioned by waiting interjects spaciousness into a frantic day. Savouring these moments is less a matter of discipline, and more a matter of attending to opportunities. Answering these invitations to stillness, I know that peace is not a rarity found in remote forests, but an ever-present vitality found right here, right now.

As a matter of practice, I note the moments that require me to wait. I return to awareness and settle into my own senses. Some forms of waiting are more fraught than others. Stuck in a queue that does not move, impatience and irritation rear their heads. If I am skillful in mustering awareness, I will sense their colours and textures, the tingling on the back of my neck, tightness in my chest, the shallowness of breath punctured by exasperated sighs of frustration. Here is an opportunity to study the multiple valences of my inner experience. With the gentleness of a loving parent, I say to Impatience: *I see you, and I will take good care of you.* Then follows a softening and a settling into the moment. The episode becomes a revelatory lesson in my conditioned responses and interjects the possibility of spaciousness.

Devotion is a response to the sacred, and everything is sacred

Many years ago, I practiced a demanding form of Chan Buddhism that required meditators to sit for ninety minutes each session. These sittings were mentally and physically demanding, and I often struggled with great discomfort in the closing minutes of each session. I remember one instance, when I was meditating at home, settling into my seat and softening into the silence of the apartment. My gaze rested on a patch of carpet until the world dissolved into a haze, a deep ocean of stillness. After 90 minutes, legs stiff and sore, I got up from my seat to make a cup of tea. I watched ribbons of steam rise from the kettle, listened to water slosh into the teapot. I suddenly felt the tenderness of the moment. Everything was suffused with love and contentment. I felt my eyes moisten with tears, moved by the sacredness of this ordinary act. The sheath of indifference had slipped away, and I felt the poignancy of everything mundane.

Modern life is charged with activity. Duty commands the hour; business indentures our labour. Conflating amusement with leisure, many seek relief in entertainment only to further subject the mind to excitation. A bleak information landscape keeps us rivetted to the screen while sapping our spirits. We move from intensity to intensity, never fully finding rest and reprieve. Our inner landscapes leveled by weapons of mass distraction – we no longer marvel at the subtle gifts that life offers. There is exuberance in the scent of spring air, splendour in the sparrow's song. Pour cream into coffee: observe clouds of ochre rise against a black sky. Study the breaking lights on the surface of water, the bending reeds of grass in the brush of wind. Like the two disciples who did not recognize Jesus on the road to Emmaus, our entrenched indifference betrays communion with the sublime. The ordinary moments of life are none other than visitations of the sacred. Returning to the small and unassuming, we recover the munificence of life and reclaim our inheritance as children of the great cosmos.

In practice, I prepare and eat at least one meal per day under the light of mindful awareness. Each gesture is an act of devotion. I fill a kettle with water and notice how my ears are tickled by slip and slop of water. I take strips of kale and line them on the board, run my fingers along the frilly leaves. I split an avocado and spoon out the soft, oleaginous flesh. I imagine my sight

as the view of a roaming camera composing the scenes of an exquisite documentary film. Each scene cinematic in tone and poetic in mood: the steam from a cup of coffee, the nuts sprinkled on the salad, the fork stirring a bowl of dressing. Mindfulness sanctifies the prosaic. Devotion is the discipline of returning to the mundane, making a sacrament of the most banal activities that compose a day. Appreciating the drama of the ordinary, contentment is not something to strive for, but something already at hand.

There is affordance in constraint—seize the opportunities found in limits

In the years since my return from the island, the world has been rocked by turmoil: extreme weather events, political maelstrom, pandemic, economic upheaval, war. Not a single person on the planet has escaped the far-reaching ramifications of these global events. The compounding stresses of isolation, masks, public health restrictions, unemployment and inflation have disrupted the stability and predictability of life. Most of us found our personal freedoms curtailed, our choices circumscribed. Purchasing power eroded by inflation, we can no longer afford what we took for granted. It comes as no surprise that this string of global malaise has precipitated a widespread mental health crisis.

Contemplative traditions offer guidance in times of instability and scarcity. In monastic and eremitic traditions both East and West, there is a concerted effort to preserve values related to poverty. Poverty, in this context, does not refer to economic privation, but rather the conditions conducive to inner growth. Without an abundance of resources to draw upon, contemplatives must confront their insecurity and strengthen their faith in providence; they move against the dictates of desire and nourish virtues of thrift and resourcefulness. They train on the path of uncertainty and thus diminish their reliance on external conditions in the refinement of inner freedom. The constraints that restrict our habits are not always impositions to resist—they carry within them an invitation to explore the undiscovered possibilities within us. There are skills to learn, reservoirs of untapped creativity, new affiliations to forge, new pools of knowledge to seek out. Constraints provide inducements to live better with less.

In practical terms, I live on a cash allowance that limits my spending each week. Feeling pinched, I had to find ways to stretch each dime. In so doing, I learned to make bread, pickled vegetables, tastier meals with fewer ingredients. I salvaged discarded lumber for construction projects. I connected with online communities and video libraries to learn how to repair appliances and fixtures. My wife has taken up knitting and has produced some delightful garments. These practices are neither new nor revolutionary – many others have long practiced frugality and developed superior skill and craft. However, for the modern consumer, the significance of the practice lies in an attitudinal shift: by embracing constraint, we learn to befriend scarcity while drawing out the potential for skillfulness and resourcefulness within each of us. This movement toward thrift and resourcefulness stands in contrast to the orthodoxy of growth and expansion that animates the capitalist-industrial enterprise. Reliance on external forces in the pursuit of personal fulfillment only exacerbates anxiety and dis-ease, since the vagaries of the global economy and the policies of foreign governments lie outside our immediate sphere of control. Learning to seize the opportunities presented in each crisis, discovering resilience and creativity in the throes of adversity, we find ourselves thriving amid the constraints that press against us. In doing more with the little that we have, we come closer to the inventiveness found in nature, which sprouts myriads of life from of a small handful of elements.

Acknowledging the reforms sorely needed to address systemic inequality and vulnerabilities

faced by marginalized populations, the encouragement to befriend scarcity is not a blithe condonation of economic hardship; rather, it is a reminder that unbridled excess stands outside the principles that underwrite ecological systems and is therefore unsustainable. Indeed, there are many who cannot stretch their dollars any further, and society bears a responsibility for ensuring their wellbeing. However, those who live comfortably, who take for granted the culture of plenitude, are now presented with an opportunity to discover the possibilities afforded by scarcity, the joy of shedding needless things. Contemplative simplicity neither makes a virtue of austerity, nor extols the nobility of deprivation. It petitions to an unencumbered life, free of the stresses that clutter our homes and minds. The simplicity of living in the woods — spending little but appreciating much — can serve as a guide in times of restriction and constraint.

Flames Adrift, Dharma Rain

Given the magnitude of the challenges that tower before us, one can imagine an urgent question rising to the fore: “how does contemplative practice address war, starvation, climate crisis, racism, inequality, and the host of injustices that afflict humankind?” The question is not merely an indictment from salty skeptics — in fact, I believe the question is indispensable to the contemplative life, the fire that burnishes the sword of inner wisdom. In nourishing the stillness within, we enlarge the capacity for steadiness and constancy at the very moments when external forces threaten to ram us off kilter. We tap into a deeper reservoir of poise that is unperturbed by the tumult, and from that deep stillness, we can be effective in serving others, demonstrating with our comportment that even in adversity there is resilience and agency. From stillness, we leap into action knowing that our efforts must not replicate the cycles of reactivity that frays the fabric of togetherness. We join with others to repair the world: campaigning for just policies, marching with others to protest exploitation, growing vegetables in a small garden, hosting play sessions for children, raising money for food drives, and much more. These actions can be done in the spirit of devotion, without fixation on outcomes. In meeting each moment with compassion and equanimity, we train ourselves to work with joy and sorrow both large and small. Inner peace is not a state of mind; it is being at ease with all states of mind. Cultivating inner peace in ourselves, we cannot help but exude peace in a world scarred by turmoil.

Commenting on the state of race relations in the United States, Isabel Wilkerson once remarked: “We changed our laws, but we did not change ourselves.” The legislative, technological, economic, and political changes that we need are part of a larger change in collective consciousness that is now afoot. Contemplation cannot change the world, and therein lies its strength. It does not promise grand visions of an ideal state, which has been used to legitimate the death and suffering of millions. Instead, contemplation changes the world within, the inner reality from which we live out our shared existence. Its transformations are tectonic in scope: hardly discernable on the surface, but continental in range and depth. By returning to awareness, holding space for simplicity, and strengthening contact with stillness, we might find ourselves extending the spirit of the forest into the bustle of the city, thereby softening the white-knuckle grip on ambition and progress. A flourishing human life, the Buddhists tell us, has little to do with external conditions, and more to do with stoking the spark of wisdom innate to all of us. There are opportunities and occasions for awakening all around us. The time for practice is now. There is no other time.