

The first three weeks were nice. Working, sitting (about 4 hours a day), reading, chanting, stretching, avoiding caffeine and alcohol.

When I saw how everyone there was really interested in self-discovery and (most, at least) were interested in being good people, I felt like it would be a good place to live (not really as a resident, but nearby, as I had recently been considering moving)

I wasn't all that interested in sitting. I tried to focus on my breath but mostly just thought (Hey! Are you breathing right? Sitting right? Is that right? How's that breath?). The abbot mostly just told me to keep going with it in Dokusan. Some other words but they didn't really stand out. There was one experience where I ended up crying for a few minutes while thinking about a particular young woman but I didn't even bother mentioning it. I was too nervous in Dokusan to say much.

Sure, I felt like I was getting a little better at being aware of what I was doing throughout the day, but not that much.

Halfway through the month I got poison ivy. Fuck. It wasn't terrible but just a constant annoyance. Around that time I also developed my first stomach ulcer (I was eating a lot). Fuck.

I was looking forward to Sesshin week because I wouldn't have to talk to anyone or do very much work! Fuck yeah! I hate work and people are usually annoying!

And the first couple days were nice like that.

My mind was still pretty much just, "Hey! How's the breathing? Is that good breathing? What's happening with that breathing?" constantly, but more intense.

I mentioned during the first Sesshin Dokusan about how I had no idea when to let thoughts go and when to just keep trying to go back to the breath. The abbot suggested I let the "how's the breath going?" thoughts follow their course and see if something comes up. So I did that.

"Hey, how's the breathing going?", "Well, clearly you fucking suck at it because you keep asking yourself about how the breathing's going instead of fucking BREATHING! FUCKING IDIOT! etc. etc."

So there was some cursing, at me, for not breathing right.

That lasted a few minutes, tops.

Then it stopped. Then I started to violently torture myself. Ripping off limbs, stabbing myself with nails, etc. There was still some screaming and whatnot but it was mostly just physically violent impulses.

That went on for a few hours. There'd be times, like during Oriyoki, that violent impulses would arise in conjunction with actions I was taking. For instance, while bringing a spoon to a mouth I could feel an urge to stab that spoon into my eye.

I kept torturing myself until a short break after cleaning and then I could feel myself realize that I wasn't being bothered enough by what was happening. So I thought that torturing/raping/etc. the person I cared most about in the world would be more appropriate than torturing myself.

Then I'm not sure how long that lasted. It was violent, there was screaming. I don't really remember how the rest of that day went (mentally, anyway, the sitting/work/etc. routine was quite time consuming). I think it was just me torturing myself and that person as much as possible and in the most insidious ways I could think of.

That night I slept for about two hours. I woke up and I was clawing at my arms, all the poison ivy sores had been broken open. I couldn't get back to sleep and ended up showering and then drinking tea and sitting until morning.

I can't quite recall my state of mind until the next day's Dokusan. I mentioned what happened (not about the poison ivy, it didn't even occur to me to mention it). He said a little bit about that and ultimately suggested I just let my mind do whatever it wants for the time being.

So I did.

At first I was happy and excited. "Oh boy, we can do ANYTHING!" "How do you think we can torture him?" "Let's get him aroused, that would be really embarrassing in this situation!"

I tried. I wasn't interested.

"That was disappointing. Fuck it. I'm just going to listen to some music. We have permission to do ANYTHING!"

So I listened to music for a while. Plenty of 80's power ballads. It was quite pleasant! I enjoyed it.

I think an hour or two later I got bored with music. Then I got violent again, except this time it was more outward. I pretty much just started torturing everyone around me how I had been torturing myself. Lots of mass decapitations. Plenty of one-on-one with extra screaming and whatnot.

There was a little bit of destruction of non-human things, but it was minimal. There was also a bit of self-destruction, but not very much at all in comparison.

However, there were a few times when I came up with some new ways to torture myself. Like imagining myself having sex with my mother. I didn't hurt her very much. "No, he's enjoying killing her. Find something he actually hates."

But mostly that day was spent listening to music and then torturing other people.

I slept for about an hour or so that night. I woke up and I had been clawing at my arms again. I showered, didn't feel like sleeping. Drank tea. Sat. I found myself screaming in my mind as I sat. I threatened to kill myself, to torture myself, to destroy myself. There weren't a lot of violent impulses at this point, mostly threats.

I was screaming for hours. At one point I was reciting the Heart Sutra as I screamed. I was extremely tired by morning zazen. I also had asked to go without robes since my poison ivy had been significantly more irritable after being utterly broken apart multiple times. It was a very cold pre-dawn morning in the zendo. I could do little but focus on my fatigue and cold.

I can't quite remember how my mind was until later that night, during the next dokusan. I recall losing most of those feelings of fatigue after dawn warmed and lit up the world. Although I'm pretty sure during this time was the experience I described as attempting to 'take the elevator down into my gut' in this post.

[http://www.reddit.com/r/zen/comments/2ipol2/taking\\_the\\_elevator\\_down\\_to\\_the\\_gut/cl4awxa](http://www.reddit.com/r/zen/comments/2ipol2/taking_the_elevator_down_to_the_gut/cl4awxa)

I told the abbot about my day. He eventually asked me how much I allowed myself to feel pain.

"Allow? I don't feel as though that's something I have any control over. It either happens or it doesn't."

So he recommended I look into that.

So I did.

At first I just tried to make myself cry. That was a rare occurrence for me typically but I just listened to a song that sometimes made me cry and I eventually started to cry.

Then I went from that song to other things. Other songs. The worst things I'd ever done to others. Hatred for all the years spent sitting in classrooms, angry about how stupid it all felt. Memories of the happiest things that had ever happened to me. A lot of memories about a particular young woman.

There were a lot of powerful memories of my time spent hospitalized and psychotic. A lot of remembering the delusional thoughts and how wonderful they were to believe. A breakfast in

the hospital. How that breakfast felt like the best meal I'd ever had, how there was a purpose to eating that breakfast, and how everything I did mattered in some way.

A lot of thoughts/feelings were just rushing through me. Eventually I was just elated. I was just so happy to be alive. I just felt like existing and life were unimaginably beautiful and I was shocked to think how I had forgotten that.

I was crying the entire time.

At one point, I believe it was during walking meditation. There was an experience that I will mention now is beyond my ability to relate in words.

I felt like I was filled with a sensation. Actually, I felt like I WAS the sensation. I just FELT.

SENSATION!

EXISTENCE!

Somehow, this sensation was simultaneously kind of like an emotion and kind of like a thought or belief but kind of like the sensation of a breeze against your cheek. But it was kind of none of those things.

The emotion aspect of it was like joy.

The 'sensory' aspect of it was like a whole-body vibration, but it was also like 'everything I was seeing' was vibrating in a sense, but not in a visual sense. Perhaps it was like a combination of different senses, almost like synesthesia.

Anyway, the "thought" or "belief" aspect of it was like, "Everything that has ever happened, every moment of reality that has ever existed, from the very beginning, if there ever was a beginning, has been working sequentially from moment to moment causing each moment and then the next and now we're at this moment causing the next moment."

At some point I noticed some distinctly contradictory thoughts AFTER this.

"Like, oh hey, am I causing things? Am I causing all these seats to be empty? Is everything happening just for me right now?"

At some point I was like, "No, I don't think so, lol, probably not. I am too self absorbed!"

I was pretty amused with that whole process for a while. Although eventually, somehow, I dove back into the current of emotion of joy, anger, crying, etc.

Really, the crying was never “sad.” “Sad” has always been more of an absence of feeling for me. Crying always felt good. I had actually often felt guilty in the past for crying because of how good it felt. That time, no, I didn’t feel guilty.

So that was night. Then I slept. Then the next morning I started crying even before we were sitting and cried for a good hour and a half. Then it became hard to cry, possibly in part because I forgot to drink more water and I started to get a headache and it may very well have been from dehydration.

I felt like I’d realized something important. I just felt energetic. I felt enthusiastic to be alive. That feeling of elation hadn’t really dissipated entirely. There was some, unfamiliar thrill to be alive left over.

In addition, there was a powerful sense of confusion. “What the fuck is going on? I’m really happy. That’s fucking unusual. Am I making too big a deal out of this? I am really happy to be alive and do things and it seems like what I do will make a difference in the future. Everything’s somehow exactly the same so why am I so fucking happy?”

Not all of those were literal thoughts, though I put them in quotes. A lot of them were more like flashes of feeling that were merely associated with verbal thoughts.

So the next Dokusan, the last one before I left the monastery in a few days, I shared what came up immediately (not everything, I was still smiling and giddy like a total fool.)

He responded kind of how I’d expected him to respond. Very encouraging but at the same time warning me to remember what I did not know.

He stopped talking at one point, but I was still kind of stunned stupid with too much happiness (perhaps still a bit of nervousness, but it felt mostly like stupid happiness) and then he let me go.

Then, again, I was excited and confused/curious. I didn’t feel much else but that for the next day. Sesshin ended. Okay. Everyone was excited and chatting over breakfast. People were embracing. Okay. I’m just going to eat my omfg delicious french toast over in this room where it’s quiet.

Still happy. Wtf...

I called my mother to remind her when I’d be getting home. For the first time in a long time, I really heard pain in her voice. Just, everything she said, pain.

A conversation started up in the kitchen at dinner that evening. Somebody heard me say something. When it was just the two of us alone, they started to ask me stupid fucking questions. Like, if I had been given “the tools” I needed, or some such nonsense, or how old I

was. Dude, I'm still a happy idiot! Why are you making my brain work so hard answering these questions?

He recommended I look at a koan somewhere in the library after I mentioned feeling like Alice in Wonderland.

I told him about the pain in my mother's voice. He said he remembered the same thing. He stopped drying his dishes, saying he'd finish them later, and left to make a phone call.

I eventually made it to the library, didn't find the koan, but did end up getting interested in another. Something about a man, claiming his belly is half-full, seeking the dharma at another monastery, something about a mountain, having a conversation with the abbot (abbess?), becoming a gardener, and then claiming his belly is now full of two halves.

I found myself constantly scratching at my poison ivy as I tried to focus harder on the koan. I was occasionally 'feeling' something while reading. Something about enlightenment being an endless process of perfection, not a liquid you fill a container with. I wasn't sure, didn't feel like I really "got it".

I felt like I lost the fight with the scratching and just gave in left to the shower. I kept scratching and scratching, some blood was flowing but I didn't particularly care, I made up some kind of justification like 'It's just going to leave a scar at worst'.

Eventually though I found that I could just stare at the wall. There was still a struggle but I started to re-gain control by testing if I could control for a moment, establish that, and then re-testing and strengthening that sense of control. At one point I was moving my arm back and forth out of the hot shower (which irritated it) and made up random numbers on the spot to time myself and give myself rules to master. So eventually I said something like "Ok! Now watch 57 breaths and then dry yourself!" and it worked very well. I felt an incredible sense of concentration.

I tried to re-read the koan but didn't "feel" anything anymore so I just figured I had failed somehow. I walked back to my room, feeling like a failure, telling myself that I'm a monster, crying, but then somehow deciding that that was bullshit. I was a good person. So what if I used to be worse, it didn't matter why I was trying to be a good person now, that's what being a good person is. So fuck it, I'm a good person.

I went to sleep and dreamt.

I was attempting to practice zen somehow, see into the nature of enlightenment.

I was looking. I was 'seeing' and moved my face forward to try to see what I was seeing, my face contorted in a kind of confused curiosity. Then I was "seeing" 'seeing' and my face

repeated but a bit more extreme. Then I was asking myself what this whole 'seeing' business was about and my face made kind of a "WTF is this?" face. Then I saw/felt something. It felt like awareness of the process of what was going on. I felt like I was really understanding/seeing/feeling/'awake'.

I started to open my eyes in the dream, or was it the dream? I was just gently, very very gently, opening my eyes. Then I looked and noticed I was in my room, awake. It was like there had been no waking up from the dream. It was as gentle as walking down a long hallway, with a single light at the end, and the hallway gradually becomes brighter and easier to see as you walk down the hallway. That was how it was like opening my eyes in bed.

I followed an impulse to walk outside somewhere.

While walking, I started thinking about the inherent perfection of reality. It wasn't really perfect. Pain existed and it sucked, but there was something perfect-y about it.

These thoughts are actually a little hard to explain, as they stem directly from an idea I came up with a couple years previous regarding natural selection over an infinite amount of time.

Basically, it's my opinion, for various reasons, that in "the long run", natural selection favors intelligent, compassionate, and selfless beings. Selfish beings only ever have a "temporary" advantage.

So following that, I came to realize that the natural conclusion of these beings is basically buddha nature, and that this would be happening everywhere in reality, on all scales of reality, and that reality pretty much must be the ultimate (as of now) evolution of the intentions and actions of these beings.

So everything that has ever happened in my lifetime, everything I've ever done, has been set up by an infinite number of incomprehensibly intelligent and compassionate beings trying to do their best with an imperfect reality. Okay. I guess that's comforting. Even if I fuck up or die or something, it actually does serve some purpose.

So from that point on, I was just like "ok, I'm just going to do what I want then."

And then a somewhat familiar mood came over me. It was, again, very much like mania. I wasn't weeping in elation but I was in a pretty peppy mood. I trusted my impulses and acted on them.

One of my first impulses, "hey, I haven't checked Reddit or the outside world in a month, I wonder how that's going."

Next impulse, drink some tea.

Next impulse, cry while listening to music for a couple hours.

I was happy to follow simple impulses like that.

I should mention, I woke up after maybe 4 hours of sleep, so this was quite early in the morning. At one point, while I was quite enthusiastic after crying, I sat myself down and told myself, very, very sternly, that no matter what happened, from this point on, everything I did was fine and I didn't need to feel guilty about it. There was nothing else I could have done. I tried my best.

No matter what. Because I **WOULD** forget this idea. I **WOULD** suffer in the future. But that's fine. Just ingrain this belief in your mind. You're doing your best. Don't worry about it. Even if you forget this, just **FEEL IT!**

Then I just spent the day following impulses.

For a while I just sat alone and cried on and off, drinking tea. Somehow it felt like I'd never had tea like that before. Like, I was actually paying attention to each of the different "areas" of my taste buds and how each area matched up to a particular aspect of the flavor of that tea. I'd had that exact tea a couple dozen times but never really tasted it in the same way before that.

Then I ate breakfast with some people. I was pretty giddy and must have seemed totally nuts, but people humored me and some enjoyed it.

Eventually someone suggested I go for a walk around the grounds and I did. It was an extremely pleasant walk. I really enjoyed the smells of the forest.

In fact, I enjoyed it so much that I completely forgot to see-off one of the residents who was leaving that morning! I was a bit bothered that I missed them but couldn't really do anything about it so it was a rather fleeting moment of disappointment.

I started hearing pain in people's voices again. Some of the things I did, stupidly innocent as they were, seemed to make people sad (not angry, sad). As though I was reminding them of something depressing.

I didn't much like that, and I cheerfully made a point to myself to watch out for that and try to minimize it as best I could, not that I would feel guilty about it, but just keep an eye out.

I was often thinking along those lines, "Ok, that's interesting, I don't like that, better keep an eye out for it in the future."

Kind of bothered but cheerfully ready to deal with it and prepare for it.



At some point I started feeling like my enthusiastic innocence was really bringing other people down and everyone wanted me to leave the monastery immediately. Those thoughts persisted for a couple hours, but eventually I just accepted that, yes, I was going to be leaving the monastery soon and I should just enjoy my time here while it lasted.

That night I sat for a couple hours. Eventually I started thinking about how little I seem to express love. I got the idea in my head that I really wanted to make an effort, before I left, to express love to someone there.

I was going to compliment someone, but I chickened out when I was standing in front of them, didn't say anything.

I ended up leaving them a note before I left. I was actually a bit scared in writing it. I wanted it to be an expression of love, not my normal chicken-scratch-third-grade handwriting. It took me a few tries before I got it down. Also had to make sure it was 'seeing the perfections' enough.

Not much happened before I left. I mostly avoided people. I mostly avoided speaking. I made my best effort to "see the perfections" and "actualize truth" and "speak the perfections" as well, so that everything I said was the most pure expression of truth and good will I could muster. This sometimes meant speaking in a kind of poetic way, and I was slightly worried it'd piss people off, so I didn't speak much, but I did basically get my point across to people.

So I got on the bus to go home.

It was ~16 hours before I'd arrive at my final bus stop.

"OH! Hey! What a perfect opportunity to allow pain and pleasure to pass through me!"

So I basically tried doing that for the next 16 hours.

Things got intense.

The first few hours of my trip were pretty upbeat. I enjoyed the scenery. I enjoyed just sitting in my chair. I enjoyed seeing new people on the bus. I enjoyed whatever thoughts popped up in my head. I was just a little bundle of joy and appreciation of life.

Then I took my first break at the bus station and got something to drink (~3 'normal' beers worth).

"You're too happy. How can you be a decent Bodhisattva if you can't even remember what suffering is like? Have something to drink!"

Yeah, that's seriously what I told myself.

My bundle of joy was maintained for the next couple hours. I enjoyed a chocolate pastry with my drink. I started contemplating how to be a better Bodhisattva and all was well.

I took a nap at some point.

At some point I started thinking about her, that particular young woman.

I thought a lot about compassion, love, loss, virtue, cycles of universes, the nature of reality, letting pleasure and pain pass through me, and how much I missed her, wanted her back in my life, hoping that somehow if I became good enough that we'd just naturally drift back together.

A few hours before the trip ended, I was on a bit of an emotional rollercoaster. Happiness mixed with emptiness, up and down. A rainstorm, lightning. Water. Life.

Focusing on my senses. Getting hungry. VERY hungry. I had eaten plenty that day, more than my fill, and alcohol normally killed my appetite, but I was STARVING. I finished off 1/4 lb. of almonds but I was still starving.

I pretty much still totally trusted that whatever happened was as perfect as reality was going to get at that point, and that trying to figure out how to make reality better than what it was naturally going to be was a waste of time.

I didn't ignore or discount my thoughts. Whatever thoughts I had were as-perfect-as-anything-else. Those were simply the thoughts that came up at that time.

I didn't want to live without her. There was a hole. I was hungry. Life was going to be pain without her.

By the time the bus pulled into the station I had come up with three plans to kill myself. First, if I were to stumble upon a gun, I'd just shoot myself in the head.

That didn't seem very likely, so I decided to just jump off a really tall building if I couldn't find a gun.

But then I figured someone might try to stop me, so I decided that I'd just casually stroll off into the middle of nowhere and starve to death where nobody would find me.

I felt like I shouldn't eat right now. I really wanted to die.

I made it home. I put on a pleasant face and chatted with my mother. Eventually she wanted a hug despite my poison ivy. It wasn't the worst thing that had ever happened to me.

She wasn't anywhere in sight.

I wrote an e-mail to the abbot in the hopes that somehow an international society of zen people would get in touch with her and let her know how much I needed her.

By the end of writing that e-mail (~6 page) I'd decided not to kill myself. I figured there was pretty much no chance that he'd have anything to say but cautious advice about not killing myself and eating and whatever I should do to not think/not-think myself into utter destruction.

I guess I would keep living.

I ended up with a typo in the e-mail address. I only noticed the next day, after I'd gotten a few hours of sleep.

I wrote a 'normal' e-mail, attached the manic one. He wrote what you might call a normal response.

P.S. I can't really say that any of my thoughts/ideas on the bus ride were truly 'delusional' in a conventional sense. What was unusual was the emotional reaction to those thoughts/ideas.

Although, I can't quite remember every moment of those 16 hours, I didn't include many details of those thoughts because... well it didn't feel necessary, nothing you probably couldn't imagine yourself just going over themes I listed, so there might have been a nutty thought or two in there. I'm pretty sure they haven't lasted though! No offense taken if you think I'm still utterly, conventionally insane.

## The Stuff about Me:

Been extremely depressed for a very long time, and symptoms started up around pre-school age (not entirely coincidentally because I had to start going to pre-school and then school-school) and pretty much just got worse as life progressed through high school.

College started to reveal my bi-polar tendencies. My father is BP1 and there are undeniably some significant tendencies inherited. LOTS of freedom (first time with alcohol or drugs) mixed with the slightly-less-boring-work shifted me up a lot. I was REALLY HAPPY in college sometimes! Lots of mood swings, especially when the fairer sex got involved.

Speaking of which, totally awkward here. Could barely speak to girls. Really emotionally immature from lack of any even-slightly-intimate friendships (or relationships of any kind, familial or otherwise) before college. I've still never had sex, never had a girlfriend, and never been on a date. Not ugly (gosh, I hope I'm not that deluded) but just so fucking awkward. I promise.

So, a year and a half in, I have my first psychotic break (about an hour after talking to a particular young woman, for the first time). It revolved around me being God, then trapped in hell, and it lasted ~12 hours, until dawn. Cue me spending the next month and a half with crippling anxiety about death, frequent crying spells and becoming utterly fixated on that same young woman who, later, very briefly gave me some advice.

End of the semester, young woman goes home for break, cue another psychotic break which eventually evolves into me having fallen in love with her in a past life, creating a new universe to fall in love in again, and me fucking it all up somehow and driving her away.

This last for about a month. I'm led to a psychiatric hospital within a couple days and through a healthy dose of anti-psychotic medication and time, I eventually realize that I had just totally fucking lost it.

Fast forward through the next several years. I'm in and out of school (dropped out four times since then) and working for about 2.5 years in that period. Really unhappy. Spent some of that time idly contemplating the nature of reality. There was a little bit of study of some classical Buddhist texts as well as Freudian psychology. Interest didn't last long for anything.

At some point I just come to think that being a 'good person' is the best thing anyone can do with their lives. I keep trying to force myself to get a degree in clinical psych (despite hating everything associated with academia).

So, cue about a month and a half ago, I end up going to a zen buddhist monastery with the help of a kind relative. I didn't know anything about zen. I wasn't particularly interested in buddhism, though I knew I essentially agreed with their philosophy it wasn't important to me. I'd simply heard about the place having a good reputation.

I just wanted to "got to a monastery" in the hopes that I'd "become more disciplined" and then that'd kickstart something, maybe but probably not but fuck it I have nothing better to do, in my life that would make me move a little faster towards my goal of "be a good, productive person." I was probably the least excited that I was going out of anyone I knew.

So I went.