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My Year With the Big Buddha

A Lamorinda skeptic tries out Buddhist meditation.

BY LINDA LENHOFF

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The evening was mine. The sky was a dusky blue, I'd fed the cats, I'd finished my work, and I'd done all the laundry I could find. Sure, I could have stayed home and cleaned more, promoted peace in the family, or just baked brownies and lasagna for the week (see note about promoting peace). But I had signed up for a Buddhist meditation course, something new and frightening. My repeated resolutions to be kinder, to do more good deeds, and to learn how to relax looked me in the face and said: You are flat out of excuses. My husband complimented me on being brave and said if I went, he'd change the kitty litter. I flew out the door.

I headed about two miles north to Buddha Gate Monastery, a peaceful kingdom on 17 acres overlooking Lafayette, which offers a free 12-week Beginning Chan Meditation series and advanced courses beyond that.

A long driveway led me up to Buddha Gate, a series of modest buildings that look a little like a junior high school,

surrounded by trees, statues, and a tranquil fountain. There's a big parking lot, so even finding a parking space was a peaceful experience. As I entered the meditation hall, the first thing I learned (after where to put my shoes, and to remember to bring socks) was how to bow to the exquisite and enormous Buddha statue, and why. I discovered that bowing is not a religious gesture; it's a sign of respect for what the Buddha went through, which sounds like quite a lot. For one thing, the Buddha survived on an incredibly strict diet for a long time, then decided that starving himself was just not for him. Many of the women I know would bow to that decision alone.

I learned to follow numerous rules taken quite seriously by the attendants and shifus (dharma masters). To say hello or good-bye (or thank-you, or I'm sorry I fell asleep during meditation), I learned to place my palms together and speak the universal greeting, amitofu, rather than saying "hi" and waving madly, my usual greeting, which I tried hard to stop doing. I learned the correct path for walking through the meditation hall, the proper way to chant the Heart Sutra, and the tricky way to fold the meditation blanket.

Thoughts of kindergarten and naps filled my mind at the touch of the soft yellow blankie, but meditation hour is no time for sleeping. The shifus instructed me to use meditation to help calm the "monkey thoughts" in my mind, the endless train of commands that goes: There's laundry in the machine, and I have to get milk, and my deadline has been moved up, and I can't remember if I gave the cat his medicine, and I need to meditate more. Those thoughts.

I sat silently and meditated, counting my breaths. I tried not to notice my legs aching from sitting cross-legged under the blanket. I ignored that they went numb, then I attempted to unfold them silently, so the shifus wouldn't notice. My classmates' blankets also rustled quietly, so I knew I wasn't alone in this monkey thought. I also participated in a fast walking meditation (in my slippery socks), trying to ignore others passing me by on the left, as if I were still the slowest kid in junior high. I let this monkey thought go, too.

The abbess of Buddha Gate, the small and surprisingly humorous dharma master who runs the monastery, told the class that meditating would allow us to be more calm and aware, and open each of us up to the compassion and kindness that lies within—the Buddha nature we all share. This struck me as a sweet, encouraging idea, as if the abbess had whispered a quiet, spiritual "you go, girl." She didn't say this was going to be easy, though.



What stayed with me through my year-plus of meditating is the Buddhist idea of impermanence, that life continually changes, that I shouldn't get attached to material things or even states of happiness (as in don't get excited when the house is clean—that's impermanent). But don't get caught up when things go

badly either, as this will change. I told my teen daughter about this ebbing and flowing view of life, that what she's going through today will change soon. Maybe even 50 times before tomorrow. Meditation classes taught me to not focus so much on what's wrong, but instead pay attention to what I'm doing now to help improve the situation for tomorrow, and beyond. It's all about moving on, creating good karma through kindness and compassion, the little bit of smiling Buddha inside us all. Don't dwell, the abbess said. Sounds like a good mantra to me.

These ideas made me ask myself, What are the right actions to take this particular minute? I've found that meditating and reflecting on this question have made me feel more optimistic and far more positive, no doubt because I'm focusing on the world around me, not just myself. As exotic as parts of Buddha Gate are, the basics of cultivating compassion make perfect sense to me. Except for the numb legs from sitting cross-legged for half an hour, my experiences at Buddha Gate have been very rewarding. After studying for a year, I couldn't wait to go through classes again to continue taming my monkey thoughts. And to help my newbie classmates learn to fold their blankets just right.

Plus, I think they're getting used to me at Buddha Gate: Last night as I left, waving good-bye madly as I still do, two of the shifus waved back to me enthusiastically from the front steps.

Linda Lenhoff is the author of the novels [Life a la Mode](#) and [Latte Lessons](#).

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Sunday, May 1, at the Lafayette Park Hotel & Spa, more than 320 guests celebrated Caribbean style at the Las Trampas 28th annual What's in Our Hat? Tropical Heatwave, raising more than \$120,000 for individuals with developmental disabilities. Special guests included ABC Anchor Dan Ashley and Caribbean-born Adonal Foyle, Warriors former center and current community liaison.

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