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AUTHENTIC MINDFULNESS

NEW STATE OF MIND

Chiang Mai in northern Thailand is known for its spiritual heart. Among the lush forests and spectacular temples, travellers can meet monks, offer alms, and learn to meditate.

WORDS BY LINDY ALEXANDER

I have what is commonly known in meditation circles as ‘monkey mind’. Every time I have tried to meditate, my thoughts have just ricocheted like tiny ping pong balls around my brain. I love the idea of meditation – it’s just that I’ve never been able to do it.

That’s why I’m up before dawn, bumping around in the back of a *songthaew* (public bus) through the sleepy streets of Chiang Mai. By the end of this morning’s Mind and Soul outing with Urban Adventures, I’m hoping to drop the ‘ey’ and learn how to have a monk mind.

As we make our way to the temple of Wat Sri Soda, my guide Thongbang Thotsadon gives me a crash course in Buddhism. “Many people think that Buddhism is a religion,” she says as we

drive through the lantern-lit streets. “But it’s a philosophy. The aim is to reach enlightenment, and you do that through meditation and mindfulness. People think you have to stop thinking, but you don’t. You just have to observe your thoughts and then come back to the present moment.”

I’m jolted into the present moment as we reach the temple. A long line of young monks in flame-coloured robes are walking downhill. They all carry metal bowls – holding them out as locals walk over and place bundles of food inside. The monks are not allowed to cook or ask for food, so they rely on these daily contributions, offering blessings in return.

I place bags of warm rice, gaeng hang lay moo (pork and ginger curry), juice and biscuits into their bowls, and with their eyes lowered they give me a throaty blessing. I watch them slowly walk away – stopping to collect more food before circling back to the temple.

The monks eat twice a day, and at the forest temple of Wat Umong, I sit cross-legged in a small pavilion with five monks as they have breakfast.

“They mix all the food together,” Thongbang says. “It extinguishes their individual desires for particular food. They are not eating for taste, but to sustain life.”

When I whisper that I hope our breakfast doesn’t follow monastic rules, Thongbang starts laughing. We receive the monks’ blessing and walk through the temple’s surrounding forest, past crumbling, moss-covered

There are more than 40,000 Buddhist temples in Thailand.

statues, around the towering pagoda and through 700-year-old meditation tunnels. “My own temple encourages us to do the same as the monks, but I really, really don’t like my food mixed together,” Thongbang tells me with a chuckle.

After a breakfast of sticky rice and beans, congee and spicy tofu (all served on separate plates, thankfully) we head to Wat Suan Dok for a chat with a monk. I’m quite apprehensive. A whole hour with a monk. What am I going to ask him? Is he going to judge me when I confess to my incessant mind chatter?

I needn’t have worried. From the moment he arrives on a motorbike, I know I’ve struck it lucky. For a holy man, Phra KK is refreshingly down to earth.

When I tell him about my monkey mind and that I’ve tried meditation by using an app on my phone, he smiles. “Everyone has a monkey mind,” he says kindly. “Even me. Apps where someone guides you can be good for beginners – but ultimately you need to learn to guide yourself.”

He leaves the room and comes back with a string of beads, which he then drops into my hands. He tells me to count the beads, inhaling and exhaling with each one, counting to three before starting again. “When thoughts or emotions come up, don’t follow them,” he says. “The key is not to dwell on those thoughts, just bring your mind back to your breathing.”

I look at him. Can he tell I’m already distracted? We have been talking for over an hour, and I’m thinking about Thongbang waiting for me outside. “Don’t dwell on your thoughts,” he reminds me. “Let them come and let them go.”

I close my eyes and begin. The outside world drops away. Thoughts come into my mind – but I bat them away. When I open my eyes, Phra KK is gone. I tuck the beads into my bag and head outside. He is sitting in the shade with Thongbang. “You have the beads?” he asks. I nod.

“Good,” he says, smiling. “Now you can start to tame that monkey mind of yours.”

PLAN YOUR JOURNEY

Urban Adventures’ ‘Chiang Mai Mind and Soul’ tour lasts for four hours and helps travellers learn about Buddhism and monks. Breakfast, transport, entrance fees and activities are included. From \$75 per person. urbanadventures.com

VISIT MINDFOOD.COM

Chiang Mai may be famous for its ancient temples, but it’s also the heart of Thailand’s thriving organic food community. A variety of food is on offer, from markets to restaurants. mindfood.com/chiang-mai-food