

Is cultivating inner peace a forgotten art? Searching for stability in times of uncertainty

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In Buddhism, there's a famous parable about the origin of Zen, in which the Buddha preaches a sermon by sitting in silence and holding up a single white flower. Most of his audience has no idea what he's up to, but one disciple named Mahākāśyapa gets it and smiles. I thought of this story, about how wisdom, although ineffable, can nonetheless be seen, as I reflected on the photographer Laurence Ellis's most recent photos.

This photo portfolio is Ellis's second project shooting intentional communities. It developed out of the exploration he began with Document's story *When Society Doesn't Work for You, Create Your Own: A Happiness in Utopia* (Fall/Winter 2017). For that assignment, Ellis wanted to understand the draw of utopian communities. Why do they still exist? Do these communities, founded decades ago, still have something to offer people seeking, in Ellis's words, "to live together in not quite such broken ways"? To try to answer that question, Ellis traveled from Scotland to India to photograph four very different communes. When he returned to London, he immediately sensed that the societal fractures he'd been concerned about had morphed. Escalating tensions on the Korean peninsula, Londoners' growing concern about the future

of artificial intelligence, and their increasing distrust of technology combined to produce a zeitgeist of impending apocalypse. "Are we facing the end of the world?" Ellis wondered. "If so, what should we be doing?" Something radical, it seemed to him. But he also suspected that "running off into the woods and growing our own vegetables isn't the best response to what is happening at the moment." This new kind of social dystopia called for a new radical counter-response.

We might already be seeing such a response. Ellis contemplated whether, like Henry David Thoreau or utopian pioneers of the '60s, people today are seeking out places where they can get away from modern technology and live in nature. They're looking for quiet, isolated refuges to turn inward and connect with the meaning of their lives. But what fascinated Ellis, and what makes this contemporary moment different, is that many of today's idealists aren't heading for writer's cabins or eco-communes, but Catholic monasteries and formal religious retreats. "People seem to be gravitating towards something primal and familiar."

Ellis decided to continue his exploration of utopian communities with a new project focused on religious





Previous spread: Yeshe Sid and Yeshe Lhadron are residents of Holy Isle, a one-and-a-half-mile island located off the northeast coast of England. Both practicing Buddhists, they are participating in the Inner Light Retreat that lasts for three years, three months, three weeks, three days, three minutes, and three seconds.

This page: Boston Beach is located in Portland, on the north coast of Jamaica, and is a favorite point of respite for local communities.

communities. He visited a wide range, six of which are featured in this visual profile: two Roman Catholic Benedictine monasteries (both in the U.K.: Belmont Abbey in England and Pluscarden Abbey in Scotland), a Catholic convent (Sisters of Mercy in Jamaica), an Orthodox Christian church (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in Jamaica), a Tibetan Buddhist retreat center (Holy Isle off the coast of Scotland), and a Rastafarian commune (Bobo Hill in Jamaica).

Is organized religion coming back in style? Ellis thinks so. His peers, he explains, grew up with parents who were into Eastern philosophy and New Age philosophy, so “going to mass is rebellious now.” And Ellis sees that in the buzz around the Salvator Mundi, a recently discovered painting of a serene-looking Christ by Leonardo da Vinci that sold in November 2017 for the highest price of any painting ever. “That sale captivated the world. The image is incredibly haunting and mystical,” he says. “And Christie’s sold the painting in its contemporary auction, although it might have been sold as an old master. I find that telling.” Ellis doesn’t see himself as a religious person. His mother grew up in a workhouse orphanage run by Catholic nuns, which he describes as “straight out of *Oliver Twist*.” She left the Catholic Church at the age of 16 and rejected organized religion. As Ellis was growing up, she encouraged him to shun religion as well—which, of course, now makes it all the more interesting to him. “I wanted to look at religion from my own perspective,” he explains, “and with a more open mind.” To discover what attracts people to join religious communities, he

secular people and city dwellers enmeshed in the morass of constant busyness and distraction. He sensed that, far from being irrelevant to the societies they exist in isolation from, secluded spiritual communities like these are more relevant now than ever.

If you are like Mahākāśyapa, the disciple who got the Buddha’s sermon straight away, the photos alone may tell you all you need to know. But if you are like the others who were sitting in the Buddha’s audience when he held up the flower, and you still don’t get it, you might need some help. I’m a Tibetan Buddhist practitioner, and although I have never been to Holy Isle, I have lived in dharma centers throughout Asia over many years. I’ve observed vows and ethical rules, practiced silence, and lived in a community in seclusion. I’m also a contributing editor at the Buddhist magazine *Tricycle*, where I write about the transmission of Buddhism to the modern world. So first, an admission. There is a scene in the film *Howl*, about the obscenity trial of Allen Ginsberg’s poem, in which the prosecutor turns to the literary critic Mark Schorer and asks him to translate what Ginsberg meant when he wrote, “angel-headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night.” Schorer replies, “Sir, you can’t translate poetry into prose. That’s why it’s poetry.” I face a similar kind of translation problem here. The spirit and nature of religious life baffles explanatory prose. But in our modern secular and scientific-materialist world, where many people have lost a foothold in any form of contemplative life, it may still be helpful to try.

“If you are someone with no connection at all to organized religion, the important thing to keep in mind is that the religious form of life is incommensurably different from the mundane.”

decided to immerse himself in them. Rather than arriving and shooting for a few hours, before leaving right away, as he would ordinarily when working, he chose to live on location for several days, getting to know each community from within as he photographed it. He imagined he would do this with a photojournalist’s objective distance. To his surprise, living in these sacred spaces touched him personally and evoked unexpected inner peace, spaciousness, and quiet.

This transformative power of religious place is what he set about photographing, a kind of alchemy of consciousness that happens, he guesses, through some combination of spiritual practice, community, and setting. If he could capture this elusive spirit of contemplative life, he could hold it out as an alternate possibility for

If you are someone with no connection at all to organized religion, the important thing to keep in mind is that the religious form of life is incommensurably different from the mundane. By analogy, if you were to assume that all spoken language is a single one when listening to a foreigner speak a different tongue, it would sound to you as if they were simply speaking your language incoherently. Likewise, if you fail to draw a distinction between mundane life and religious life, you will view all religious life through the lens of mundane life. You will certainly misinterpret and very likely misjudge it.

For instance, deciding to remove oneself from friends and family to join a religious community for an extended period of time (or even for life) is an unusual choice. If you were to view this action through a mundane lens, you

might be tempted to judge the people pictured in Ellis’s photos as being escapists. Sometimes, when I tell people I’m going on retreat, they imagine I’m headed off for a spa holiday, that I’ll be dangling my ankles in cool water or being massaged with hot stones. It’s true that in ordinary life, when someone leaves behind the responsibilities of family and work to travel to a place where they will be sitting quietly, ostensibly doing nothing, that usually signifies “vacation.” But I can attest: sitting with your own mind for hours, without interruption, is no holiday.

In July 2014, the journal *Science* reported a study done by researchers at Harvard University and the University of Virginia. Participants were placed in an empty room for six to 15 minutes with no phones, books, or writing implements. Researchers asked them to stay seated and awake and to spend the time thinking. When the time was up, the subjects were questioned about their experience. Not only did the experiment subjects, on average, *not* enjoy being alone with themselves, but when researchers introduced a device into the room that would allow subjects to give themselves mild but uncomfortable electric shocks, a surprising number of participants chose to shock themselves rather than sit still and do nothing. The authors of the study concluded: “Most people seem to prefer to be doing something rather than nothing, even if that something is negative.”

Left to their own devices, people search for happiness anywhere but inside. But that is not a reason to avoid a contemplative life; rather, it is the very point of adopting it. From a spiritual perspective, ordinary life is marked by dissatisfaction. We crave what we don’t have, thinking that change will make us happier: a faster car, a newer house, different scenery, a more perfect partner, or a less stressful job. We reach for another drink, open the refrigerator again, or obsessively check our email. Maybe we get what we want and the restlessness temporarily eases, but inevitably we find ourselves with that craving again. Contemplative life offers an alternative, a resting place for the spirit, that is not precarious, shifting, and impermanent, but solid, stable, and lasting. A refuge at long last.

This kind of happiness is of a different order than ordinary happiness because it is truer. As anyone who has done psychotherapy knows, turning around to face oneself means confronting one’s unaddressed personal problems, the brokenness of one’s life, one’s failures and

regrets, the immensity of one’s fear, and the fragility of one’s hopes. As difficult as this process is, this “seeing what is real” comes as an enormous relief.

There is a famous saying, attributed to one of early Christianity’s Great Desert Fathers, Abba Moses. “Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.” Contemplation isn’t like solving a math equation or confirming a scientific hypothesis. It isn’t figuring something out or nailing something down. It is tuning something in. You align yourself to a new axis of meaning. The Christian theologian Thomas Merton wrote, “Life is this simple. We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent and the divine is shining through it all the time. This is not just a nice story or a fable, it is true.” Connecting to that divinity and living in appropriate relation to it is what a religious form of life is ultimately about.

This activity, of true contemplation and reflection, is not an ordinary one. The places where people connect to the divine aren’t ordinary places. The Tibetan Buddhist retreat center that Ellis visited, for example, is called Holy Isle because spiritual seekers have used the island as a retreat for well over a thousand years. On the island there is a cave that was used by the 6th century hermit Saint Molaise and the remains of a 13th century monastery. Edie Irwin, a Buddhist practitioner and psychotherapist who frequents Holy Isle, describes what it’s like to inhabit this ancient sacred space. “It is a place that assists you in your better attempts,” she says. “I haven’t really had the time to mope around here. I have never been in a situation here when I could be in a bad mood and indulge it. But I can imagine that the place would work you over something fierce if you did that. You bring to this kind of energy what you are, and it brings what it is. There is great potential in that. But it won’t necessarily always be a happy or peaceful ride. We are incredibly lucky to be connected to it. It is a place that people never forget.”

When someone is tuned in to divinity, others can feel it. There is a palpable dignity and ease in how a person sits and walks, what they say, or the look in their eyes. They’re at peace with themselves, and it shows. When the Buddha sat in silence and held up a flower, he didn’t have to explain his enlightenment because he was displaying it. You see this in Ellis’s photographs. He put it this way when I asked him what it was about his subjects he was trying to capture with his photographs: “The way they have lived,” he said, “is expressed through how they look.” X



Ijahnne Samuel's family lives in a traditional Rastafarian community in Bobo Hill, Bull Bay, Jamaica. It is a Rasta belief that, “God is man, man is God.”



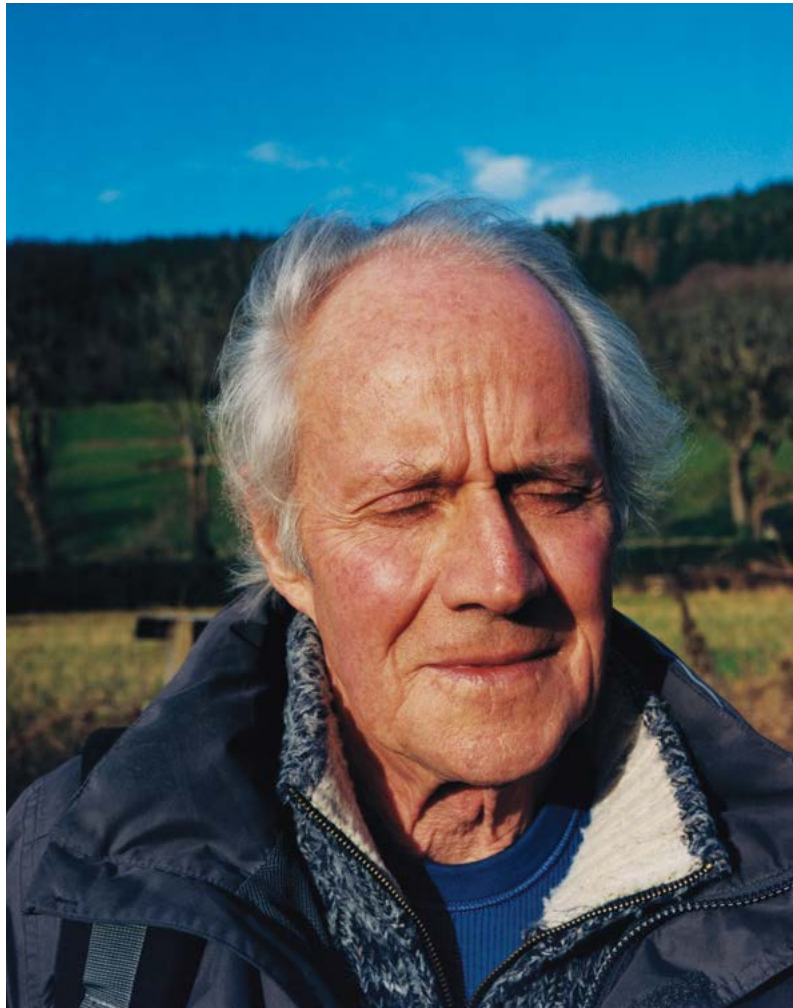
Hanifa in her Sunday best in Mountain View, Kingston, Jamaica.



Talice Samuel and Matthew Rose in Bobo Hill, Bull Bay, Jamaica.



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Kiyana, Chandice, and Ini attending mass at the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in Trench Town, Jamaica.

A guest of Pluscarden Abbey, Black Burn, Moray, Scotland, U.K.

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Patricia Robertson and Brother Michael de Klerk attending Sunday mass at Pluscarden Abbey, Black Burn, Moray, U.K.

Fisherman Kevin in Bull Bay, Jamaica.





Holy Isle encourages the monastic principle of *stabilitas loci* (staying in one place).



A member of the Bobo Ashanti in Harbour View, Jamaica.



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Monk Rinchen
boarding the ferry
from Holy Isle.

Vestment rack
in the sacristy of
Belmont Abbey,
Herefordshire,
England, U.K.

Opposite page:
Captain Jim Blakely
operates the ferry
between Holy Isle
and Arran, U.K.



Woman in Sunday best in Trench Town, Kingston, Jamaica.



St Molaise's Cave, Holy Isle, is an important geographical metaphor of *stabilitas loci*, having been the home of a 6th century Catholic saint, the location of a monastery in the 12th century, and now the home of the Centre for World Peace and Health Buddhist retreat.



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Venlo greenhouse at Pluscarden Abbey.

Taxi driver John Brown in Harbour View, Jamaica.

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Matthew Rose in Bobo Hill, Bull Bay, Jamaica.



Father Patrick in the cloister at Belmont Abbey.



Brother Cyprian Prosper Amasa in traditional white garb at Pluscarden Abbey, Black Burn, Moray, Scotland, U.K.



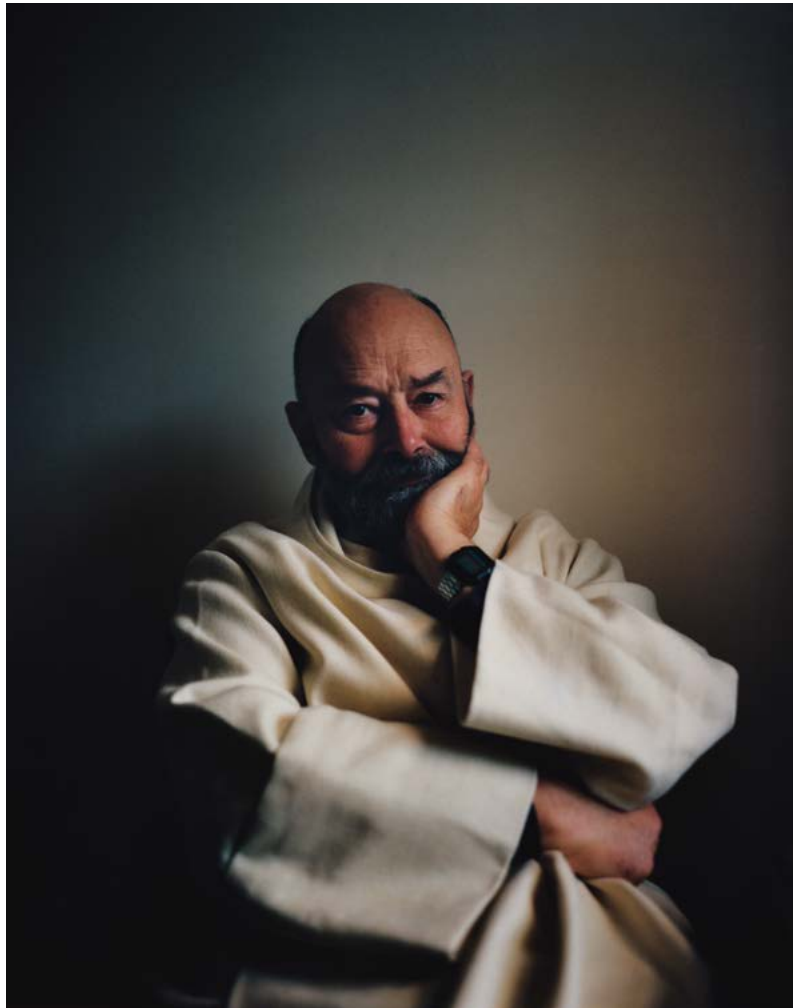
Sister Carmen Chensee of the Convent of Mercy in Kingston, Jamaica. The residents of the convent have chosen to no longer wear traditional nun's habits.



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A father and son attending the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in Trench Town, Jamaica.

Father Giles at Pluscarden Abbey.



Phen on Holy Isle.

A resident of Portland, Port Antonio, Jamaica.



Gregory Fanuel attending the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in Trench Town, Jamaica.



Beechwood forest at Pluscarden Abbey.

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