

Things Learned & Things Forgotten:
Reflections on a Semester Abroad

By Daniel Castle

When I set out on my journey I knew exactly what I was doing. I was going away, first for a semester long trip with fellow students, and then for a semester long solo excursion across the world. Better than that, I was going out into the world like the Zen poet Basho. I would adventure, contemplate, and write prose and poetry about my journey. When I returned home, I would be welcomed with open arms. Would my writing be well received? Of course it would be, some might even call me a prodigy. My plan was ambitious, yes, but I was perfectly capable of pulling it off. Layered over this bubbling confidence was an unrefined understanding of Buddhism.

My goal was to use my travel experience to reach a profound understanding of Buddhism. I thought that perhaps the conditions of my traveling experience would teach me a lot about Buddhism. By constantly being on the move, I would learn non-attachment, having nowhere to settle and no opportunities to get too comfortable. I wouldn't be materialistic, I would only travel with a backpack full of items, only those absolutely necessary for my trek. Between these conditions and my own self-enforced mindfulness I came to think that life on the road would be a "microcosm of existence." It was a strange idea, almost a scientific approach to philosophy. I was hitting the road to test a philosophical hypothesis, namely, that putting myself into a forced existence as a wandering ascetic would lead to the discovery of some profound wisdom.

So I set out, for an eight month trek, with only one backpack and a smaller day pack. Despite my minimal luggage, I was packed for conditions from Vietnam to Siberia. At the time, Siberia was a reasonable destination for part of my trip. I began my journal almost immediately:

“Visit to Khe Sahn, mostly abandoned. One sided captions and culture shock. Very different seeing our artifacts on display on other side of world. Long, bumpy bus ride. Sleep early upon return.”

- Daniel Castle's Journal: August 22nd, 2009

At the trip's outset, that was the kind of journal I was keeping. I'd rarely use words like “I” or “the.” My writing just matter-of-factly retold the day's events with minimal interest. Basho too wrote with minimal interest, he remarked on things as though they were bits of plant matter floating downstream while he sat on the riverbank watching and writing. My own writing was missing something though. I didn't have the love of beauty that Basho has. I was trying so hard to not be attached, but rather than avoiding grasping, I was just pushing everything away. On the other hand, my childish attempts at poetry sometimes did a decent job of capturing the beauty I was seeing, poetry lends itself to beauty better than prose.

“In between the roads
Beside the battered shanty
Lotus flowers grow”

-Daniel Castle's Journal: August 18th, 2009

I was quite pleased when I found that I began to think about poems in five or seven syllable phrases. My amateur Haiku pleased me well enough at the time, and still do in their own way. My journaling of day-to-day events needed to come a long way. I needed to start appreciating the beauty that I was continually surrounded by. I needed to start putting life into words besides a mundane set of “what I did today” phrases. Of course, I thought that this was all a change that would come about through more writing, and while my writing did change with

time and practice, it was I who had to change.

In some ways, the change that did occur can be attributed to some strong feelings I had late in my visit to Vietnam. The September 9th entry in my journal is almost like a different person writing. Every possible aspect of the writing is different. Rather than a quick recap of the day, there is a thoughtful reflection on the past several days, there is emotion, and there is sincerity. If you ever get a chance to look at the journal itself, you will see that even my handwriting changed after September 9th. Like a caterpillar crawling into a cocoon, this was only the start of another phase of transformation. Eventually, I received a piece of email informing me that I would not be permitted to continue with my second semester travel plans. This was the point where the change that had been occurring was most evident. For a moment, I was stressed out, then I realized I didn't really care if I went home or not. I suppose this change was partly facilitated by the class I was taking on Theravada Buddhism. I was having a problem with the strict, old fashioned Buddhists. I couldn't agree that, because a good experience will eventually end, it is necessarily a bad experience. I was pushing back against the Theravada Buddhist, ultimately bringing about a change in myself. I was becoming more Daoist, I was willing to take the bad with the good.

Everything that has happened, for good or ill, it's teaching me the way. I blew up. It reminds me that anger will always be in me, it will always be with me, and there is nothing I can do but accept that sometimes I will be angry. "Only dead fish go with the flow." that's what I thought of Daoism, but it's more like sailing. You sit out in the water and readjust your sail, trying to find the wind, only by tuning in and catching which way the wind is blowing can you make progress. If I get sent home, if I don't, it makes no difference. I'd love to stay. I'd love to go. I'll do my best to appeal the ruling, but if I get sent back home, I really won't mind it. I think.

-Daniel Castle's Journal : October 1st, 2009.

It took me another month or so before I decided what I would be doing next. I had

learned my lesson but I didn't know what I'd do with my new education. I didn't pick Basho back up for a while either. I wasn't scrambling, but I should have been. I was a semester away from graduation and had no plans for an SMP. For some reason, I wasn't worrying about it.

Somewhere in the back of my mind I had the vague impression that there was a paper worth writing. In China, I made the connection and began researching my new topic. Unfortunately, the Chinese Internet sensors wouldn't grant access to much of the anarchist writing that was relevant to my new project. My new idea would look at the connection between Daoism and anarchism, specifically anarcho-primitivism. Now, having a concrete idea of what I would be writing, I returned to Basho. Although my new project had nothing to do with travel, Buddhism, poetry, or the way human beings catalog experiences, I didn't mind. My new lightheartedness assured me that there would be something worth noting, even if the reading didn't at first seem relevant to my interests. In the editor's introduction to a piece called *Kamo no Chomei*, I noted the following quote:

“The essential requirements of such meditation, whether it be for Kamo, Thoreau, or for an anchorite in a Christian religious order, are twofold: The routine of the world of affairs must be eliminated – one cannot think if one is interrupted by the desire for business success, the operation of a large household, the necessity to be elaborately dressed, fed, or entertained, or by a wife and children, Bacon's “Hostages to Fortune.” Also, the recluse is animated by a desire to think of ultimate realities, not merely by the desire to simplify his life.”

– Kamo no Chomei, p. 293

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* was perfectly relevant to my future topic, and it was during the reading of *Kamo no Chomei* that I first realized it. I found in the piece, a kind of connectedness to my new topic. While the reasoning for becoming a hermit was different than my own, or that of anyone else I had read for the semester, there is an underlying rejection of society in Kamo. Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* idealizes the nomadic existence, almost looking at society as a

misstep. Kamo and Basho become disinterested in the mundane nature of modern life, and so they retire to their own huts in the woods to practice poetry and calligraphy. For Basho however, simply retiring was not enough, like Chatwin's nomads, he too found satisfaction in traveling. This realization, this disinterest and rejection of society, this was what would pull my SMP together. These people were hermits first, and anarchists second. They didn't seek to destroy hierarchy, they just retired to the woods, and kept to themselves, living in such a way that government became irrelevant to their lives. During a Lihsu village stay in Thailand, I really got back into reading Basho, and his influence can be seen in the journaling I did during my stay:

As we approached,
a daunting hill,
a pick-up slowed
to offer a ride.

Hill tribe peoples
not officially recognized in the country of their birth
can still be heard to say: "His Majesty the King."

Plantations change:
from Opium to coffee,
gowning the next legal drug.

Like weeds in a garden,
whiskers on a chin
aren't grown out of care
but out of neglect.

-Daniel Castle's Journal: November 12th, 2009.

The particular edition of Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* favored a four line structure for translating haiku. Apparently the editor felt that converting the poems into four lines helped to maintain the colloquial feel that haiku has for a Japanese reader. Naturally, the four line structure took off with me as well. Even the poem that turned out as a three line piece felt no need to stick to a set pattern of syllables. While my journaling needed a certain amount of opening up, appreciation of details, and willingness to display emotion, my poetry needed to shake off restrictions, to learn that it didn't have to stay in one size, shape, or syllable count. While reading Basho in the village I also found how hard it was to read something so simple. As I mentioned earlier, Basho writes as though observing from a riverbank. While it is natural to just “space-out” and let the river float by, Basho really seems to enjoy it, observe it, and take it in. It takes a special kind of person to write such a thing, even reading it can be taxing. Like the person on the river bank, I find that I had a tendency to just stare at the page, letting my eyes roll over the words without thinking about what they mean or what they say.

“Today I find my head too filled with my own thoughts to adequately deal with others. I make it about two pages into Basho, then completely forget what I've just read. It's our last full day in the village. We all had a drop too much last night and find ourselves in shambles today. I expect there will be more drink readily available tonight, but I aim to take it easy. Despite our sad state we managed to deal with more corn today. It made for pleasant work, sitting and talking in the shade while taking the kernels off the cob. I've said before, that I like movies, TV, and video games for the same reason I can't read today. Being able to do something that doesn't require my full attention is a great boon to my thought process. The same reason I liked filling ice cube trays and water jugs at home: it's just enough to do that you can think about something else. It allows me to switch off the bulk processing and just utilize the peripheral thinker. I can think without having to concentrate. Today, there's too much cooking to not find myself distracted. To sit down and read something that I need to pay attention to is too much to ask of me today.”

-Daniel Castle's Journal: November 13th, 2009.

While my semester abroad won't ultimately be relevant to my SMP, grad school, or maybe the rest of my life, I don't regret it one bit. Like Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*, looking back, there have been points in my life where I can say I would probably be a very different person if I had or had not done certain things. The ones that come to mind are often extreme opposites: I had to choose between West Point Military Academy and St. Mary's Liberal Arts College. I don't think either would have been a bad choice, but I'm glad things worked out the way they did. My SMP was going to be called *Escaping Me: A Buddhist Travel Journal*. I think there is an implied question there though, "If you run away from yourself, what do you come home to?" Now that it's all over with, I can see that I didn't run from myself, and I certainly didn't leave myself at home. I did, however, leave Dan the Buddhist behind at a picnic table somewhere in Thailand. Now the question is this, "If you leave yourself behind, who came home?"

"I guess that's that's the real example of how this trip has changed me. I went from a crew-cut guy, majoring in Asian studies, hoping to live in China for a few years, come back to the US fluent in Chinese, and work for the government. Now I'm a double major, planning on living at home for a semester, commuting on a motorcycle, Mohawk haircut, hoping to go to grad school in Canada for philosophy. A lot can change in three months. My ambitious travel journal SMP has mutated into a serious philosophical work on anarchy and Daoism. I'm a nut. I'm on the brink of this huge change and all I want to do now is get home and start shaking things up."

Daniel Castle's Journal: November 23rd, 2009.

"I too was clad in a black robe, but neither a priest nor an ordinary man of this world was I, for I wavered ceaselessly like a bat that passes for a bird at one time and for a mouse at another"

-Basho from "A Visit to the Kashima Shrine"