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Why you should spend the weekend in Scotland's first Buddhist monastery

Samye Ling, the oldest Buddhist temple in the West, has reopened for retreats. I checked into this unlikely spot to find inner peace

By Daniel Stables

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“Imagine your mood was the weather. What would it look like?” course leader Jacky Seery asked our room full of novice meditators. I shifted on stiffly crossed legs and tried to think.

The average day would look something like this: a thick fog in the first half of the morning, burning off to reveal a sunlit, caffeine-drenched plateau by lunchtime. Dark clouds beginning to roll on the horizon with the mounting cares of the afternoon, coalescing into a violent electrical storm by around 4pm – with the tempest eventually giving way to wine-induced oblivion in the dark of the evening. In a word: unsettled.

In hopes of stilling this stormy weather, I had signed up for Jacky's "Mindfulness in Nature" course in what must be one of the most spectacular and unexpected settings in the UK: the Tibetan Buddhist monastery and cultural centre Samye Ling, in the quiet Dumfries and Galloway village of Eskdalemuir.



The quiet village of Eskdalemuir is the unlikely home of the Tibetan Buddhist monastery | CREDIT: Alamy

The first hint that I was crossing a special threshold came when I rounded the corner into the village to see strings of colourful prayer flags, bearing the Tibetan symbol of the wind horse, fluttering in the breeze opposite a churchyard. Soon afterwards, the golden tip of a white stupa revealed itself, followed by a gilded statue of Buddha, sheltered by the hood of a mighty cobra and reflected in a tranquil pool.

Samye Ling is the oldest Tibetan temple in the West, established in 1967 by two lamas exiled from Tibet, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Akong Rinpoche. Buddhism was becoming fashionable in the West, and Samye Ling attracted high-profile fans – David Bowie and Leonard Cohen were students here in the late 1960s. It has been far from plain sailing, however. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, considered an archetypal "holy madman"

in the Tibetan tradition, took his deliberately provocative behaviour to new heights, drinking heavily and sleeping with students before finally leaving in 1970.

The leadership stabilised, but tragedy struck in 2013 when Akong Rinpoche was murdered in China. He had spent his life in exile dedicated to the preservation of Tibetan culture, a cause which Samye Ling proudly upholds. The grounds and buildings are scattered with beautifully crafted prayer wheels and thangkas, intricate sacred artworks depicting scenes from Tibetan mythology.



Samye Ling has become an important part of the local community | CREDIT: Alamy

Over the decades Samye Ling has become an important part of the local community – the monastery even has two of its own tartans. “Every Scottish family or clan has its own tartan, and we wanted to be part of that culture and tradition,” said Lama Yeshe Losal Rinpoche, Akong Rinpoche’s brother, who is now the abbot of the monastery. “When Samye Ling was forty years old, my brother designed two tartans. One is for lay people; it’s quite colourful with a lot of blue and yellow. Quite a number of people have had kilts made in it. The second tartan is for our monks and nuns – a very subtle blend of reds, which they’re permitted to wear with their traditional robes.”

There are around thirty monks and nuns here, some of whom teach public courses in Buddhist teaching and meditation. Several other, more secular, courses are on offer, like the one I attended, with a focus on finding mindfulness in the natural world. Tibetan Buddhists have long fostered a connection between meditation and the outdoors, building caves specifically for the practice of *namkha arté* (“sky gazing”). The blank backdrop of the

sky, criss-crossed with moving clouds, is not only a metaphor for the mind; it becomes a literal canvas, filled in with bright spots and floating shapes, which can develop into insights or visions.

I have dabbled with mindfulness meditation for years, but have never had the discipline to sustain a practice beyond the occasional week-long streak on the Headspace app. For me, the appeal of mindfulness lies in its capacity to repair our modern attention spans, so fragmented by phones and social media. When I was a child, television was the thing that, we were told, “rotted your brain”. Now, as a man in my 30s, I struggle to watch an hour-long TV programme without picking up my phone – unless I have the foresight to put it in a different room beforehand. It’s an embarrassing state of affairs, particularly for someone whose job is supposed to be to pay attention to things.

I found the indoor meditation sessions predictably difficult, constantly fidgeting, rocking on my knees, my mind a jumble of fragments of music and words.



Daniel found the indoor meditation sessions difficult but was helped by mindfulness practice | CREDIT: Alamy

It turns out, even experienced meditators have the same problems – but mindfulness practice can help. “I have ADD, so I find sitting meditation difficult even after all these years,” says Asha Roshtron, who lived in the monastery for several years before leaving to pursue a PhD in psychology; she now lives just across the road. “The mind is like an excitable puppy, always bouncing around and chasing after the next thing. Mindfulness puts it on a tether, so it’s easier to bring back into line.”

We were led outside for a nature session with Mike Pratt, who teaches tai chi and qigong alongside his day job as CEO of Northumberland Wildlife Trust. Mike's a poetic soul, and has written eight books on the wonder of the natural world. "Listen to the birds singing," he said, as robins whistled overhead. "The dawn chorus, which started in the dark and is still going – the exuberance of spring rising in them. They can't help themselves!" Mike led us through some qigong movements – a simpler and less disciplined cousin of tai chi, aimed at regulating the breathing and grounding the body.

Then came a command to strike fear into the heart. "Go and find a tree. Spend some time with it. Hug it, if you want."

Lover of the natural world though I am, hugging trees does not come naturally to me. Approaching my mighty alder, I had to suppress the instinct to offer a handshake instead, like a distant father. Once the awkwardness had dissipated, though, I began to see a whole universe in the pock-marked bark tracks of that tree: lichens spidering out like cracks on ice, old man's beard draping the branches, carpets of moss smothering the trunk. I pressed my hand to it; it felt warm and alive. I could have stayed there for hours.

"When you go outside, you're taking your body home," Mike said. "Your mind might show some resistance, but your body loves it – it wants to be there."



The monastery hosts nature sessions in the surrounding countryside to encourage people to connect with the elements

| CREDIT: Alamy

A few small miracles seemed to manifest themselves over the course of the weekend. First, several of us noticed during the outdoor sessions that chaffinches were approaching us of their own accord, even landing on sleeves and shoes, showing no fear if we motioned towards them.

Then came something stranger. That evening, we were invited to sit in on the evening's puja (worship) in the magnificent main temple, where pillars of vermilion and mint frame walls stacked with gilded statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas. Throughout, a monk sat stock still, meditating without moving a muscle. "Did you see that guy?" someone said afterwards in hushed tones. "He was in the exact same position when I went in there yesterday."

What kind of a magical place was this, we wondered wide-eyed, where animals have no fear of people, and monks ascend to superhuman marathons of meditation? Mike laughed. "That's not a monk. It's a wax model. And sorry to shatter another illusion – the reason the chaffinches get so close is because the monks feed them."

Shattering illusion, of course, is the stock-in-trade at Samye Ling, whether you're a lama on the road to nirvana or a puppy-minded neophyte like me, bouncing around restlessly on the first steps of the path. As for the weather in my mind, after a weekend of fresh air and reflection? A little more settled, thanks.

To quote Tibetan Buddhist Pema Chödrön: "You are the sky. Everything else – it's just the weather."

Essentials

Daniel was a guest of [Visit Scotland](#).

The Mindfulness in Nature course at Samye Ling is run by [the Mindfulness Association](#) and costs £165, beginning on Friday evening and ending on Sunday afternoon.

Accommodation at [Samye Ling](#) must be booked separately, and costs from £75 for a double room, including six meals.
