



Shedding Skins: Reflections on Monastic Life and Beyond

By Scott Tusa



THE DAY I BECAME A BUDDHIST MONK was one of the best days of my life. If I had to compare it to something, it's sort of like a wedding day, but you are marrying yourself! I had been preparing for it for over 7 years, and it felt like the fruition of a lot of hard work and aspirations.

When the day arrived, myself and a group of 150 novices from around the world sat in front of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama to formally take our monastic vows. After a beautiful and moving ceremony I was motioned by an attendant to approach His Holiness.

Reaching his hand out he asked me where I was from. Both elated and extremely nervous, I replied “the United States.” “Good!” he said, as I stared blankly at his feet. Now half-paralyzed, having met one of my heroes, I could barely think.

With another brand new monk in line behind me, and before I could ask any follow up questions I was whisked off to another room, both in disbelief that I had just met the Dalai Lama, and that I had become a Buddhist monk at 28 years old.

Becoming a monk is akin to shedding one skin for another, and it takes time to feel the full impact of such a radical identity shift. Unfortunately for my friends and family it was immediate.

At first I couldn't understand their reactions, as they knew I had been planning this for years. Though upon deeper reflection it made sense, as it must have been quite shocking to suddenly see me with bright red robes and a freshly shaven head.

What followed was 9 years of learning how to live in my new monk skin. Part of this was the personal growth that came from having access to incredible Buddhist study and practice opportunities. Another part was the real emotional and psychological impact of still having to navigate my less constructive habitual patterns, and a society that generally holds material progress above all else.

...there is such a strong pull on all of us to join the modern rat-race towards endless material growth.

There were many days where I wanted to give up, thinking that it was impossible to live as a Buddhist monk in the United States. Though eventually something would shift, money would come, and I would be able to continue my study and practice. It went on like this for years, until eventually things started to change.

It's hard to explain the challenges of being a Buddhist monastic in the West to those who have never taken the leap. For many, support is hard to come by (especially for

female monastics), and a majority are straddled between two worlds.

Though some Buddhist lineages outside of my own Tibetan Buddhist tradition have established some very inspiring and supportive conditions for those wishing to ordain in the West. Overall we have a ways to go.

It is not uncommon for Western monastics to become disheartened, eventually returning to householder life. In my own case, I was fortunate in having financial and physical support, but still very much struggled with a lack of monastic community.

I was alone a majority of the time, and I started to crave authentic human connection and intimacy. I've now come to recognize this as completely natural, but at the time, especially in my last year as a monk, I really agonized over what would be best for my spiritual growth and life. Eventually I decided to return my monastic vows.

My last full day as a monk I practiced and recited prayers amongst the waves of sadness that arose. It felt like I was losing a partner who I was still in love with, while knowing deep down that the relationship wasn't going to work anymore.

The following morning, and in a somber mood, I drove to meet my monastic friend I would be returning the vows to. It was like the day I got ordained but in reverse. As I handed my monks robes back, my friend, rather than scolding, congratulated me for the years I put into my monastic training.

At first it kind of threw me back, as I was expecting him to match my mood, and tell me that there is always next life! Instead he encouraged me to rejoice in the years I was a monk, and to continue to practice just as before. This was incredibly uplifting for me on a very sad day, and his comments really helped me to openly mourn, without falling into a spiral of shame and guilt.

Once again I was shedding one skin for another, as I returned to householder Buddhist life, now in my late thirties. At first I felt a kind of mini-liberation, as if a weight had been lifted off of my shoulders. Of course this was short lived, as now I had to figure out how to function in the world post-monk.

In some ways I've found that leaving the householder life is easier than returning to it, as there is such a strong pull on all of us to join the modern rat-race towards endless material growth.

As meditation has been increasingly commodified, Buddhist teachers like myself are not exempt from the challenges of how to best serve our students and communities, making sure our allegiance is with the needs of those we serve, and not beholden to the latest fads and trends in meditation.

Re-entering the world of romantic relationship has also offered it's own challenges and opportunities (as it tends to do). As a monk I spent a majority of my time alone in solitary retreat, and I mostly got to do what I wanted, when I wanted.

This had it's strengths, as I was able to put more time into my Buddhist study and practice, but it also had it's weaknesses, as there were very few people around me who could offer feedback on where I could use a little improvement.

Now living with a new partner, I am forced to look at my self-centeredness much more directly. Even though this can be painful at times, I feel this is really where the rubber meets the road and my practice is truly tested.

Today the path continues. I wake up, I look at my mind; rinse, wash, and repeat. Monk or not my practice is about putting in the effort to grow and connect with my wisdom-heart, and to try and show up with compassion in a world that desperately needs it.

I often reflect on the words of the great 18th century Tibetan Buddhist master Jigme Lingpa: "If the meditator is able to use whatever occurs in his life as the path, his body becomes a retreat hut."

Whether as monk or householder, there is always an opportunity for freedom; in knowing how we are bound, and how we can liberate through our spiritual path: it's up to us to apply ourselves with what we know. Knowing this, life isn't a chore, but a joy, whether in robes or otherwise.

Editor's note: Scott Tusa will be teaching this spring in two of Nalanda Institute's course offerings.

Beginning January 28, join Scott for ***Cultivating Wise Compassion***, the 4th course in our Sustainable Happiness program. [More info may be found here.](#)

And, starting on March 2, join Scott for ***Meditation Teacher Training in***

Compassion. Scott will be team teaching with Megan Mook and Pooja Amy Shah. [More info may be found here.](#)

Scott's essay has been reposted here with his kind permission. More about Scott may be found on his website, scotttusa.com

Posted January 10, 2019 by [Scott Tusa](#). Category: [Teachers' Corner](#). Keywords: [Buddhist monk](#) • [Meditation Teacher Training](#) • [Scott Tusa](#) • [Sustainable Happiness](#).

© 2018 Nalanda Institute for Contemplative Science • info@nalandainstitute.org • Website by [Lotus + Pixel](#)