



## Dwelling Within

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### ENTERING THE GATE

When I decided to do a year of residential training at the Zen Mountain Monastery in New York's Hudson River Valley, I met with the monastery's Guardian Council, a group of monastics who pointedly asked me — why? They acted as a checkpoint or “barrier gate,” as it is called in Zen, a sort of loving but demanding conscience. They urged me to honestly confront my motivations and to express my true intent. When I faced this question, my response was: refuge. I wanted to know what it means to take refuge. I wanted to experience it firsthand.

I came into Zen practice years ago, with a pervasive, gnawing ache, a feeling that I eventually named “homelessness.” It was a sense of spiritual restlessness, of profound loneliness, and of not belonging — much deeper than not fitting in at the party, or even believing I must have been born into the wrong family. It was an unshakeable feeling that there was nowhere in the world (or in myself) where I could go and be at rest.

Each year after college, I moved into a

new apartment like clockwork, changed cities — I even tried another country. There was the year I got engaged and then disengaged. I switched jobs. I was determined to cart my small orange cat around with me, here and there, until I finally found the right set of circumstances in which I could settle down and just be. The whole thing was exhausting and depressing, and all the while, there was a part of me — a buried core that knew with perfect clarity there was no physical location, no other person, not even the big beautiful stone monastery I would eventually move into — that could be my true home. I knew without a doubt that the home I was looking for didn't require seeking, but I knew this the way you might hear a phrase in a foreign language you haven't yet learned. I could memorize the words, but I didn't understand their meaning. That knowing was like a powerful incantation: indiscernible, frustrating, yet something to hold close to my chest until I could translate it.

I walked through the monastery's wide wooden doorway for the first time almost