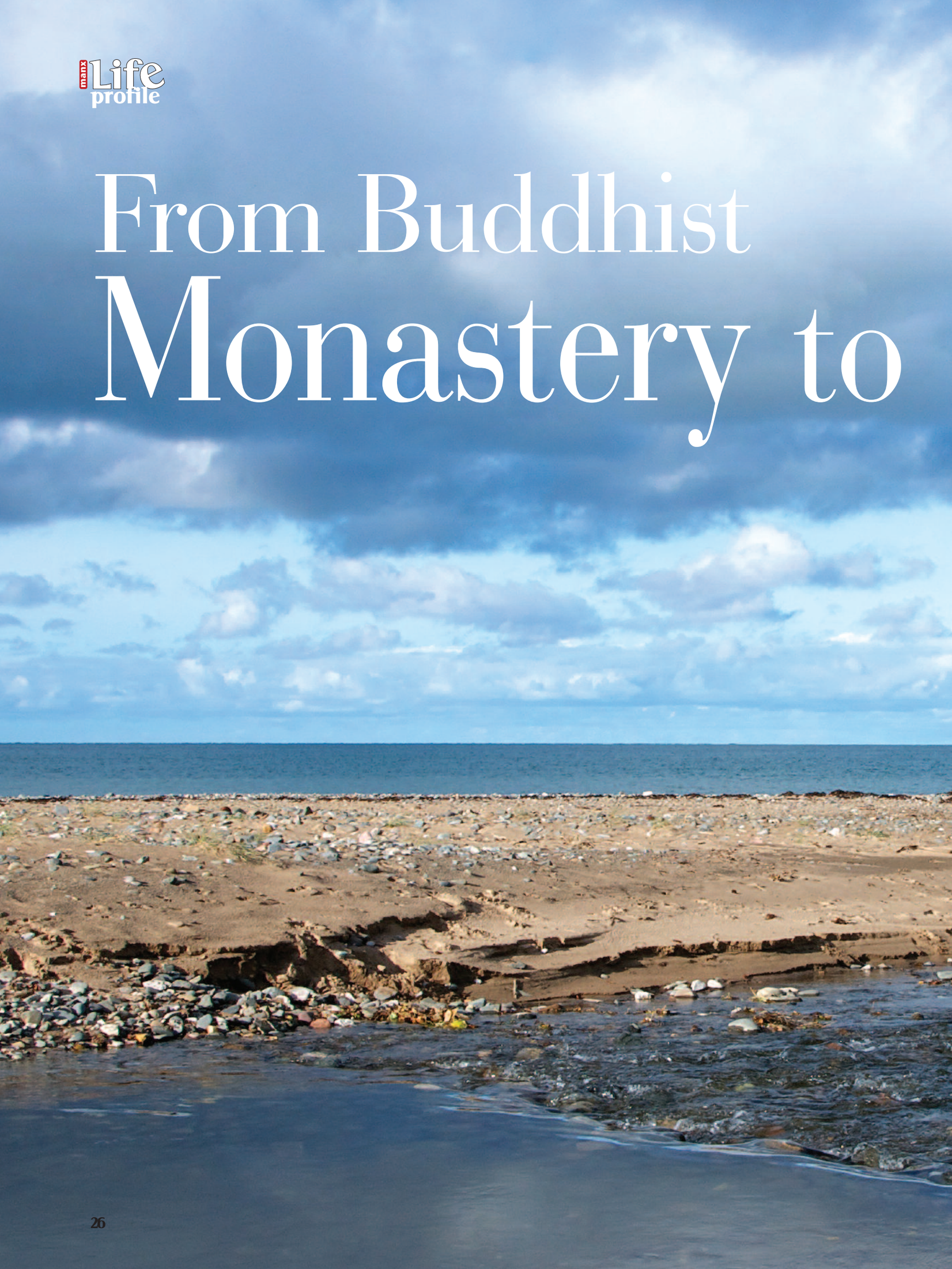
From Buddhist Monastery to



Ballaugh

Mia Hansson explains what made her abandon the hustle and bustle of London for the quiet life in the north-west of the Isle of Man…

As I sit in Ballaugh nursing a mellow glass of Merlot, it's hard to imagine that the circumstances that brought me here span a broken heart, three Zen masters and a tall dark stranger.

A few years ago I lived in north London at the junction of five main roads. Trucks shook the windows and angry teenagers threatened murder every night. I worked as book reviewer for Time Out, wearing earplugs and ignoring the shaking walls of my rented studio.

Flights of fancy tempered the daily struggle. My favourite one was about how my lover and I would somehow find a way to live together. We had a long-distance relationship, so it wasn't difficult to imagine reality far more romantic than it was.

.The ideal came to a brutal end when he unceremoniously declared that he had "found somebody more local". I think he meant 'someone more conveniently located for regular hanky-panky', but then he was never the most articulate man.

My problem was that I still cared about him. A lot. The ideal was very far from the actual, and yet I wouldn't let go of the former or accept the latter. Instead I turned to Plan C: I fell apart. My heart had shattered. Over the next three weeks, I stopped working and gave up on life. I even wished that I had what it took to end it.

But I had suffered from clinical depression twice before, and was determined not to go there again. Anger propelled me to act. A Zen monastery in Northumberland that I'd visited a few times came to mind. I'd been curious about the Zen approach to life. This time when I rang them, I was sobbing and asking for a lobotomy.

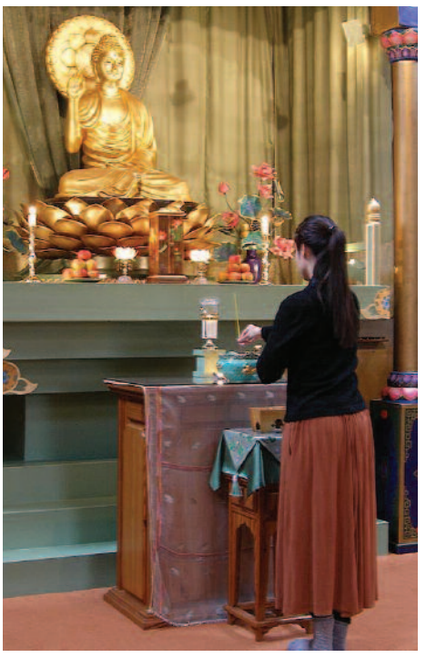
The monk on the phone, Rev. Leandra, said gently 'You're being very hard on yourself. If you're not working, do you want to come and stay with us for a bit?' She sounded like the grandmother I'd never had. It was all the encouragement I needed. I threw my things into a weekend bag and told my editor that I'd be back in a week.

Throssel Hole Abbey is a sprawling, converted farmhouse half an hour's drive from Hexham. Around twenty-five monks live there in the Japanese Soto Zen tradition, with one major difference: men and women live together. Englishwoman Peggy Jiyu-Kennett established it in 1972 after becoming Zen master in Japan, and she had been determined to bring gender equality to Zen training.

The monastery seemed quiet when I arrived from the tumult of London. A shaven-headed monk walked purposefully down the cloister, brown robes flying, then a door shut and it was quiet again. Rev. Willard, a softly-spoken monk who manned the guest department, told me that I'd been assigned a cupboard in the Ceremony Hall.

The monks had converted the farmhouse themselves. The hall on the second floor could hold eighty meditators. It was lined with Japanese monastic-style cupboards, each of which had a shelf for belongings above a folding foam mattress. At one end sat a solemn gilt Buddha; at the other, a Gothic style window faced the lawn and trees.

Along with twenty lay trainees I got up at 6am each morning to put my bedding away, rush downstairs to the bathroom, and rush back to the Hall in time for the day's first meditation at 6.15am. After an hour's meditation the monks filed into the hall to perform the daily morning ceremonial. Candles were lit and the Abbot offered incense at the altar.



After a series of prostrations, the monks filed out. We cleaned the monastery while the kitchen team prepared breakfast. After that the morning was spent in work teams, gardening, cleaning, building or cooking. We sat in meditation about four-and-a-half hours a day. At lunch the food was passed quietly down the table. Everyone stared soberly at their plate, and all that could be heard was the clinking of the cutlery.

The most exciting part of the day was the afternoon talk by a monk, when we asked questions and had tea and biscuits in the library. After the meals we had an hour's free time; this was almost as exciting as the library, because it meant that we could think and do anything we wanted. Anything, that is, except for

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talking, reading books other than scriptures, listening to music, watching TV, reading papers or magazines, driving anywhere, fixing a snack, using the phone, having a drink or playing sports.

Many have said to me 'A retreat – oh how peaceful!' but when deprived of the things we usually do to relax, we get anxious. This is one of the reasons why the rules are restrictive. The theory is that there is a layer of anxiety underneath our chosen distractions, and that when we give ourselves a chance to experience that anxiety rather than running away from it, we learn to deal with it. Eventually, it may even disappear altogether.

So we went for local walks, read scriptures, washed, napped, made notes and had interminable of cups of tea.

After the first week of surface irritation had passed, I felt more grounded and peaceful than I had since I was a child. It was exactly what I'd come for, but it also made me realise that I was only at the beginning. I had observed that the monks exuded a much deeper peace than I; and I still had so many questions. If someone attacks you, what's the Buddhist thing to do? How do we control anger? Is there a point to life? How is will different from wilfulness? Is western psychotherapy indulgent, or helpful? Does enlightenment exist?

I felt like I had nothing to lose by staying on to find out. I asked permission to stay for nine months.

I rented out my flat, and used some of the income to pay my way at the monastery. There wasn't much freelance work to lose, and I had no dependents. Not seeing my sister for our weekly drunken brunch was the biggest loss.

It felt like a vista had opened up. Monks are assigned long-term responsibilities such as Media Liaison or Journal Editor, but as a lay trainee I could afford to totally let my brain go. In the beginning of training, it wasn't unusual to see a highly powered business manager wandering dazed around the cloister, slow to understand the most simple requests. But I could see on the incredibly sharp and perceptive masters that the practice had excellent results in the long run. It felt like we were rewiring our brains: while I hesitate to use the term, it felt like a positive, consensual brainwashing. We moved from superficial intellect-based thinking and compulsive emotions, to letting ourselves be driven by a much deeper heart-based intelligence.

Outside formal retreat time we had the opportunity to make the monastery our home, practising patience via laundry schedules, snoring roommates and long hours of work. The monks turned out to be quirky and lovable individuals who each had their own reason for training. Somehow I knew I wasn't one of them. I belonged 'in the world'.

Hours of meditation each day was initially physically and mentally painful, but it became much easier. It felt like layers were falling off me, and every week I felt lighter. It also meant though that I was more sensitive, and once or twice I felt inexplicably overwhelmed by grief or rage. I learned to let it pass through me like a tide; to make as little judgment as possible.

I had gone into the monastery believing that we need lovers like we need food and water. I really thought that I would die if I had to be alone. But with celibacy, the desperation gradually evaporated. After six months I sent my lover a note to say that it was over, and after nine months I had totally forgotten about him. I had even forgotten the need for anyone at all. There is an incredible quality to both solitude and ordinary friendships, that we often miss. Forced to slow down, I learned to appreciate it.

Finally I ran out of questions and felt ready to go back to London. I would miss the monks, but hoped to stay in touch. I moved into a friend's houseshare and got a job at a newspaper. I noticed a light and positive quality about everyone that I'd never seen before, that they didn't seem to notice themselves. They seemed preoccupied and anxious.

After a year of being teetotal, the first whisky in the first blues bar was very very good. Weirdly, I retained my sobriety regardless of how much I drank: alcohol tasted good, but it didn't have the pull that it used to. Men didn't either; I loved everyone's company, but didn't feel like I needed anything from other people anymore. Ironically, being independent let my guard down and made my friendships much stronger.

Then I stumbled over a tall dark stranger from the Isle of Man in my living room, an old friend of my Manx housemate. We had been happy alone, and yet inexplicably it seemed important to both of us that we should be together. After seventeen years in London I was more than happy to move to the Isle of Man, exchanging spewing traffic with lush beach.

I love that people have the time to treat each other well here, to more often than not see each other as humans rather than competitors. A month into my new life, Rev. Leandra asked "Is the One Stop Shop still in Ballaugh?" It turned out that her family is from here too. She remembered an old man who had been too scared during his lifetime to admit to anyone that he was Buddhist. While some things stay the same, others, thankfully, move on.

Mia Hansson has written for Elle, The Guardian and Time Out and is available for talks and consultations; contact her on **miahansson.com**