

III.

**A Simpler
Lifestyle**

i. How to live in a hut

There's a dread that we normally keep at the far edges of our minds but which occasionally – particularly at 3 a.m. on a restless night – floods our thoughts. It is that if we don't constantly strive to achieve – if we slip up, or if some new catastrophe strikes the economy – we'll lose pretty much everything and we'll end up living in a caravan, a tiny one-room flat or – God forbid – a hut in the middle of nowhere.

The bleakness of this image of destitution – whatever form it may take for you – spurs us on to ever more frantic efforts. We'll settle for almost anything to avoid it: oppressively long working hours, a job that holds no interest, risky money-making schemes, a loveless marriage that keeps us in the family home or, perhaps, decades suffering the whims of a grim relative in the prospect of an inheritance. The hut is a symbol of disaster and humiliation.

It's in this fear-laden context that we might consider the case of a man called Kamo no Chōmei, who was born in Japan in around 1155. His father was the well-to-do head of a prominent religious shrine near Kyoto, which was then the capital, and Chōmei grew up in luxurious circumstances. He received a refined education and in the early part of his adult life had an elegant social circle. When he was still in his twenties, his grandmother left him a large house and his future looked bright. But then it all started to go wrong. He made enemies and was sidelined in his career; he got into financial difficulties and, by the time he was fifty, he had alienated his former friends, had practically no money left – and was going bald.

Chōmei was forced to reform his lifestyle and exist on the most slender material means. He built himself a tiny hut far out in the country, where no one else wanted to live – just 3 metres (or 10 feet) square. It was, he reflected, one-hundredth of the size of the mansion in which he'd grown up. It wasn't even a permanent structure; his situation was so precarious that he had to ensure his home could be dismantled and carted away.

A modern reconstruction of the hut shows just how small and basic it was – but doesn't convey its isolated



Reconstruction of Kamo no Chōmei's hut
within the Kawai-jinja Shrine, Kyoto, Japan

position in the hills near Toyama, an area that was considered the back of beyond. Rotting leaves collected on the roof; moss grew on the floor; the water supply was just a rickety bamboo pipe leading from a nearby stream to a little pool by the door. Chōmei cooked outside, eventually rigging up a small awning to keep the rain off in wet weather. He slept on a pile of bracken on the floor, had no furniture and lived mainly on nuts, berries and wild root vegetables, which he foraged from the woods – though quite often he went hungry. The only people he saw were a peasant family who lived at the foot of the hill and who his former grand friends would have dismissed as lowly rustics. He could only

afford clothes made from the coarsest cloth and they soon became mere rags, leaving him indistinguishable from the beggars he used to see in the city. It was here, in this way, that Chōmei lived for fifteen years, until his death in his mid-sixties.

It was also here that he wrote a short book, *The Ten Foot Square Hut* – one of the great masterpieces of Japanese literature. It's not – as we might expect – a lament, poring over the misfortunes and betrayals that led him to this degraded condition. Instead, it's full of good cheer, happiness and pleasure; one of the most touching lines is the simple affirmation: 'I love my little hut, my simple dwelling.'

What was it that enabled Chōmei to find fulfilment in such an apparently unpromising place? It wasn't that he was naturally drawn to a minimal material life: no one who'd known him earlier, in his days of prosperity, would have imagined that he would thrive under such circumstances – least of all himself. He wasn't someone who for years had been hankering for the simple life. He moved to the hut in desperation and against his inclinations; it was only once he was there that he discovered that he liked it – that it was, in fact, his ideal home.

Chōmei was guided by a distinctive philosophy. For us to follow this is a principle of hope, for we can't magically take on another individual's personality – but we can understand, and perhaps come to share, their ideas. Temperament may be fixed, but philosophy is transferable. From his book, we can identify four crucial ideas that together transformed what could have been an utterly grim experience into one of deep and tranquil satisfaction.

1. Beauty is very important

It seems like a strange place to start. Normally, one would imagine beauty to be the outcome of immense wealth: elegant possessions, a gracious home and trips to Venice and St Petersburg. But these expensive things are just the most obvious examples of beauty. As our taste becomes more sensitive and our imagination more expansive, the link with monetary wealth falls away – because many truly lovely sights are readily available to those who know how to look.

Around his modest home, Chōmei – with a sensitive eye – discovered endless sources of beauty: autumn leaves, fruit trees in blossom, melting snow, the sound of the wind rustling through the trees and the rain beating down on the roof. All were free. He was entranced by

flowers: ‘In spring I gaze upon swathes of wisteria, which hang shining in the west like the purple clouds that bear the soul to heaven.’ He found a delightful spot on the hillside: ‘If the day is fine ... [I] look out over Mount Kohata, Fushimi Village, Toba and Hatsukashi,’ and at night ‘the fireflies in the nearby grass blend their little lights with the fishermen’s fires of distant Makinsohima.’

The idea of having to cope with constant ugliness is part of what makes a lower-level economic life so frightening. Chōmei’s antidote is to stress the continuing opportunities for visual delight, even on the most minimal of incomes.

2. Time is more important than money

Although we say that time is precious, our actions reveal our real priorities: we devote a huge portion of our conscious existence to making, and trying to accumulate, money. We have a detailed and definite sense of financial accounting, while time invisibly slips away.

Chōmei, on the contrary, had a keen sense of the value of his own time, without interruptions, impediments or duties: ‘I can choose to rest and laze as I wish, there is no one to stand in my way or to shame me,’ he remarks.

He had time to practice playing the *biwa* (lute): ‘My skills are poor,’ he admits, but he had no audience and wasn’t trying to please or impress anyone: ‘I play alone, I sing alone, simply for my own fulfilment.’ He read and reread the same few favourite books, which he came to know almost by heart; he had time to reflect and to write; he meditated, took long walks and spent a lot of time contemplating the moon.

Chōmei’s activities were self-directed: he did them simply because he found them enjoyable, not because anyone had asked him to do them or because they were expected of a civilised individual. And he had this luxury only because he had disregarded the nexus of money, and the pursuit of status that is so closely connected to it. Theoretically, Chōmei could have found a job, however lowly. But he preferred to cut down his expenses to zero in the name of something truly valuable: his time.

3. Everything is transient

Chōmei opens his book with a metaphor comparing human life to a river:

‘On flows the river ceaselessly, nor does the water ever stay the same. The bubbles that float upon its pools

now disappear, now form anew, but never endure long. And so it is with people in this world, and with their dwellings.’

With this, he is reminding himself – and us – of the half-terrifying, half-consoling fact that our existence, and all our pleasures and troubles, are fleeting.

Our lives are brief, and so it is the quality of our experiences, rather than the extent of our possessions, that matters. The more things we own, the more we are exposed to misfortune: a fashionable home will soon be outdated, our prestige in the eyes of others will fluctuate for trivial reasons and the monuments we hope to be remembered by will be misinterpreted or torn down. The hut is an impermanent accommodation – it might be blown down in a storm or washed away in a flood, officials might arrive at our door and force us to leave – but by living here our needs become so simple that chance has less to work on.

4. ‘Worldly’ people are less happy than they seem

One fear that erodes our willingness to live a simpler life – in a hut, if need be – is the haunting thought that other people are having a wonderful time while we are not. Perhaps we could manage to get by, but

surely we’d always be conscious of how much we were missing out on.

Chōmei continually reminded himself that a ‘worldly’ life – which in his early and middle years he knew intimately – carries a heavy load of limitations, defects and sorrows. The life of the well-to-do is less enviable than it outwardly seems. The fashionable world is full of what he called ‘cringing’: ‘You worry over your least action; you cannot be authentic in your grief or your joy,’ he wrote. In high society, it is always paramount to consider how any opinion will be judged by the other members of the social beehive; envy is widespread and there is a perpetual anxiety of losing status – which takes the satisfaction out of prosperity: ‘Without a peaceful mind, palaces and fine houses mean nothing.’

Chōmei’s aim wasn’t to disparage the rich. ‘I am simply comparing my past life with my present one,’ he wrote, adding that the balance of pleasures and contentment was distinctly in favour of the latter. What he had been denied wasn’t – on examination – worth regretting.

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Chōmei is just one hut dweller, but there have been many. The ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes (c. 400–323 BC) lived for years in a barrel (sometimes taken to be a very large ceramic pot) in the marketplace of the wealthy city of Corinth. On one occasion he was visited by the emperor, Alexander the Great. Alexander approached with his retinue and asked if Diogenes wanted or needed anything. ‘Yes,’ replied the philosopher, ‘could you move a little to the side? You are blocking the sunlight.’ Many onlookers mocked him for missing this opportunity for riches, but the emperor reportedly remarked: ‘Truly, if I were not Alexander, I wish I could have been Diogenes.’



Thomas Christian Wink, *Diogenes and Alexander*, 1782

More recently, in 1845, the American writer Henry David Thoreau – then 27 years old, a graduate of Harvard University and heir to a prosperous pencil manufacturing business – moved into a wooden cabin by the side of a small lake in Massachusetts, where he would spend the next two years. It was marginally bigger than Chōmei’s modest home, as well as being more stoutly constructed and better equipped (having the luxuries of a fireplace and a writing desk), but the moral Thoreau drew was almost identical: To those who are inwardly free, there are riches enough available in a hut.



Interior of Thoreau’s cabin, Walden Pond, Massachusetts

Similar stories abound elsewhere in history. In 1881, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche spent the

summer months living in a single, small rented room in a house in the Engadin Valley in Switzerland. He saw almost no one, went for long walks in the mountains and stuck to a plain diet. Though a far from hideous existence, it was much more basic than the standard of accommodation that, at the time, a distinguished professor – which Nietzsche had been up to this point – would have been expected to enjoy. But he adored it – and he came back for several months almost every year for the rest of the decade.



Nietzsche's room in Engadin, where he lived on and off for several years

In the winter of 1913–1914, another philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein (who at the time was an extremely wealthy

24-year-old), designed and had built for himself a small wooden cabin on an isolated hillside overlooking a fjord in Norway.



Interior of Thoreau's cabin, Walden Pond, Massachusetts

He was to spend much of his time there over the next two decades, until the deteriorating political condition of Europe made it impossible. In 1936, he wrote to a friend: 'I do believe that it was the right thing for me to come here, thank God. I can't imagine that I could have worked anywhere as I do here. It's the quiet and, perhaps, the wonderful scenery; I mean, its quiet seriousness.'

What these cabin- and hut-dwelling people have to teach us isn't that we should actually live in miniscule cabins or single small rooms. Rather, they are showing us that it's *possible* to live in materially minimal conditions, while being good-humoured, ambitious and in search of true fulfilment. They are dismantling our fear that material modesty has to mean degradation and squalor. We can, if we embrace their ideas, live more simply anywhere – including a hut. And in the meantime, we do not need to be so afraid.

ii. How to enjoy a provincial life

There exists in our lives a grand, beguiling, but subtle myth that works its way into the centre of our brains, leading us to judge ourselves calamitous failures and driving us into years of anxious, unrewarding effort and struggle. The myth is constructed around an innocent-sounding, even exciting, idea: the notion that there is a 'centre', a special place on the planet – the right city, or district – and there, and only there, is a real and full life possible. By being exiled from the centre we are condemned to pinched, mediocre existences, cut off from everything important and interesting. We are, we gloomily reflect, mere 'provincials'.

It's a long-standing and surprisingly widespread concept. A thousand years ago, Japanese intellectuals regretted their distance from China – it was only there, they believed, that scholarship, art, poetry and refined manners could flourish. At home, they could only ever