

When the Buddha charged his monk-disciples to spread out and carry his message of liberation, they were not even a hundred strong. To the outsiders this group was known as "Ordained Followers of Sakkyaputta," but the group called itself by the simple name, the Union of Bhikkus (Bhikku-sangha). But Bhikku-sangha, while a diligent custodian of Buddha's teaching, has never been the totality of the sangha. The monks and lay people have always been sharers in the message and practice of liberation.

The Buddha compared the life of the Bhikku to the refining of gold: stage by stage, impurities are purged away; first the coarse dust and sand, gravel and grit; then the finer grit, then the trifling impurities like the very fine sand and dust. At last, "the gold-dust alone remains," until it can be run out of the crucible. Then the gold is melted, molten, flawless, done with; its impurities strained off. It is pliable, workable, glistening, no longer brittle; it is capable of perfect workmanship. Similarly, in the monk who is given to developing the higher consciousness, there are gross impurities of deed, word and thought. Through wisdom and mindfulness, these are gradually purged out, first the coarser impurities, and then the finer, subtle impurities, until there comes a time when all this dross has been removed and the basic pure state of consciousness is reached.

The Bhikku of Buddha's time thus stands as a new figure in India's religious thought—a figure radicalized by Buddha's message of liberation and radicalizing the spiritual climate of his time by carrying that message through the length and breadth of the sub-continent.

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The Woman Who Marries a Bear

A new nun's journey parallels a fable

Kwang Myong Sunim

When I read *The Woman Who Marries a Bear* and the commentary on the story by Gary Snyder, it resonated in me for several weeks. There are many versions of this story. The following is another rendition as it relates to my life as a novice nun.

The parable is about a young woman who marries a bear. We first meet her while she is out berry picking with her family. As a child, she is warned not to step on bear droppings on the path, for something perverse will surely happen to her. Men can walk over them but young girls should not. Berries make up a substantial part of a bear's diet in the summer, so the likelihood of coming across bear droppings, perhaps even a bear, is extremely high. Although she is clearly aware of her elders' warning, she repeatedly takes advantage of every dropping she finds, kicking it from side to side or dancing right through it.



Defiantly, she picks and eats the forbidden fruit, flirting with and embracing the unknown. "Come on, come on! I want to take you on!" she seems to be saying: leaving her husband; doing a hundred day retreat, teasing fate, then returning to Manhattan as a housewife for several years.

One afternoon, the girl, now a young woman, thinks she sees a man behind the bushes where she is picking blackberries. Interestingly enough, she is neither startled nor surprised. She just keeps on picking berries, occasionally

glancing over in the direction where she had seen the man. Eventually, he comes closer, out of the bushes and says to her, "Come with me. I know where there are many berries that are bigger and better, many more than you can find here." So, she goes with him and they walk and walk, stopping to pick berries but not heading in the direction of her home. As the light of the day begins to fade, the young woman thinks about her family and asks the man about going home. "Don't worry about going home," he says, and hits her on the top of her head with his big, open palm. Then, with his finger, he draws a circle on her head in the direction that the sun goes and tells her that this will help her forget. And it does. Her memory of wanting to go home and be in familiar surroundings with familiar people begins to wane, and she settles in next to the camp fire, watching her friend cook a dinner of gopher.

The promise of something bigger, better lures her away from her family. Three years later and three days into a second hundred day retreat, she shaves her head, calls her husband, and tells him that she has decided to become a nun. In a ceremony, she buries her hair, lights incense, and makes her own vows to the mountain. It is as simple as sitting by a camp fire, watching a friend cook dinner. At the end of the retreat, she is ordained as a novice nun.

Days, then weeks, pass as they continue their constant search for food. As fall settles in, the young woman notices that her companion is stocking in supplies for the winter. She realizes that, more and more, his behavior is resembling that of a bear. Physically, too, he is beginning to change, becoming heavier and hairier. His face is changing shape, his nose elongating, his eyes receding. She longs for the comfort and warmth of her human home and family. She is ambivalent. Has she made the right choice?

Everyday she wakes up in a strange room, on a strange mountain, alone. How willing she was to fall in love, and how blissful and innocent first love can be. How easy it is to fall out of love when her expectations aren't met. Trips into the world are suddenly filled with gaping stares and a sense of estrangement. Has she left the world or has the world left her? How does she fit in now?

The absence of all that is habitual to the young woman has become so painful that she plans to escape. Her pathfinder tells her that they need to find a den for their long winter's retreat. Before the first snow, they find a suitable hermitage. As her protector prepares their new dwelling, digging out the remains of the previous inhabitants, he gives her specific instructions on how to cover

their tracks so that in the spring their home will not be found. In the hope of calling attention to their presence, she breaks several pine boughs on a nearby tree. When he sees the sabotaged lair, her guardian announces that a change of location is necessary. "With broken brush so near the den, we will certainly be found," he says.

After having chosen a life direction as a nun, she still looks back, measuring, comparing life as a laywoman to her life now. She refuses to wear the traditional grey habit in public, wearing a designer suit to her brother's wedding. And she wonders if she could grow her hair and still remain a nun.

So, they continue to wander, until they come to a mountain range that the young woman feels she recognizes. Instinctively, she knows she is not far from her ancestral home. This time, however, she does exactly what her companion tells her so as not to arouse his suspicion. Then she rubs her body on the sand and grasses so that in the spring her brothers' dogs will find them.

How many trips will she make back to New York before she realizes that it is no longer her home? Where is her home? Her head is shaved, her French sports car is sold, and yet the doubt of her decision, the loneliness, leaves her anything but completely homeless. What is it that keeps her from entering the bear's den—the homeless path—completely, without hindrance?

They settle into their nest and the young woman's mate goes out daily, continuing the search for food. He stocks enough nuts, roots, and various meats for her to live on while he sleeps. It is during the first blizzard that he enters the den for the last time until spring, sure that his most recent tracks to their shelter will be erased by the snow and wind. Then he sleeps and sleeps, waking only intermittently.

Another winter retreat begins. Ninety days of sitting is no longer a diversion, but her life. Financial fears and how she looks in public are put aside, but not far from her reach.

At the time when bears have cubs, the young woman gives birth to two children, a boy and a girl. She notices that the hair on her body and limbs is beginning to thicken. Like a bear, she is eating less and sleeping for weeks at a time. She is also aware that her senses have changed. She smells the human flesh of her children and senses their needs before they arise.

She has changed. She feels the wind in a way that she

never felt before. The mountain, the circling hawk, and the singing frogs are her constant companions. But traces of doubt still well up. Even after she has entered the bear's den—the monastery—she is still not completely bear, seeing only with bear's eyes, hearing only with bear's ears.

Towards the end of the third month, her husband wakes up frequently, restless and worried. He has been



dreaming of her brothers finding their cave and can sense an inevitable confrontation. One morning he arises, sniffs the air, and smells them coming. The young woman knows he is going to die. He has to die. Soon, they hear the howl of hound dogs in the distance and her husband goes to meet his wife's brothers, who immediately kill him. She weeps. And she is still weeping when the youngest brother finds her. She tells him her story and asks him to send their mother to her with clothes for the children.

There is death. Perhaps many deaths. Death caused by her ignorance and the death of that which guides her out of ignorance. Her lifestyle dies, her dreams of a conventional family also die, and yet the ambivalence, greed, and violence of her resistance to change still arise. She blames her teacher, her husband, her abbot. She blames, imposing herself on others. Will her death ever be complete? Can True Self be realized and all that is not true die forever, or must she be the prisoner of her returning self-centered consciousness?

The young woman has lived as a bear, yet now that her husband is dead, she cannot resist her old habits. If she had lived with him another summer, she would have become a grizzly bear. But she returns to that which was once familiar, her mother's home. Once there she finds that she is repulsed by the smell of humans. So she settles a short distance from her family's cabin, in the woods to which she has become accustomed.

She talks on the phone to her husband frequently but she is no longer his wife, no longer his lover. Who is she? Who is her family? Her personal needs have become less important. Her children, her sangha occupy all of her time. Worries of parking the Peugeot in a place where it won't get stolen have shifted to concerns about whether enough money has been raised to build the temple or how much food will be needed for the next retreat.

Her brothers tease her about having been married to a bear. Earlier that spring, they had killed a female grizzly bear who had two cubs. They ask her to put on its skin and act like a bear. She pleads with them to leave her alone, for she knows that once a

bear skin is wrapped around her body, she will irreversibly become a bear. But the brothers persist, throw skins on the young woman and her children, and watch her transform. Once the transformation has happened, the brothers become frightened and shoot arrows at them. Enraged, she destroys everything. She can't help herself. She kills all but the youngest brother. Tears stream down her face as she lopes off towards the green forest, two cubs at her heels.

As for this novice nun, tears stream down her face, the whole world at her heels, and she is nowhere bound. Outside the meditation hall, the crocuses bloom and the warm spring sun melts the winter snow.

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Kwang Myong Sunim lives on Furnace Mountain in Powell County, Kentucky. She was ordained a full nun in April, 1991. The Woman Who Married a Bear was part of a collection of essays by Gary Snyder, entitled The Practice of the Wild (North Point Press, 1990). □