

and then not stay awake.

Two other quotes from Jesus are very striking considered together: “Whoever has come to know the world has discovered the body, and whoever has discovered the body is worth more than the world ... Seek a place of rest for yourselves, that you may not become a carcass and be eaten.” The carcass represents attachment to food, sex, sleep, fame, and wealth—worldliness. So one who has become a carcass is one who has a perverted knowledge of the world. A Zen Master might say, “How long have you been carrying around that corpse?,” or, “You’re just a rice bag!” A rice bag is a heavy, hard-to-handle object—so calling someone a rice bag means they have no direction, no vocation.

Each of us needs to find our vocation so we don’t become a carcass and get eaten. I can’t tell you the number of people I’ve watched die who felt like a carcass. Before they take their last breath they’ll say in a discouraged way, “What was this life all about?” It’s so sad. It’s possible to find good teachers and traditions that can help us to get in balance with our carcass, so that it becomes a vehicle for our vocation rather than the container of our greed, anxieties, and misconceptions.

But there’s no need to hold to that idea of “I am a carcass; I’m going to be eaten.” Jesus said that to wake us up. It’s a little warning: “Oh yeah, I know what it feels like to be stuck in my body, kowtowing to every desire that it has.” So just wake up.

Someone once asked Jesus, “When will the final rest for the dead take place, and when will the new world come?” People wanted to know that from the Buddha, too. They would ask, “What is Buddha? What is dharma? Show me the way!” We all think, this life is not so great, so when is it going to get better? Jesus answered, “What you look for has already come, but you do not know it.” The Buddha said it’s like a fish swimming in water and saying, “I’m thirsty.”

Sometimes it’s easier for someone else to see your Buddha-nature than it is for you. But the work begins with each of us. It’s in our center. We have to find our guts, our ability to be in balance with those five things: food, sex, sleep, fame, wealth. Dying without ever really knowing who we are can seem easier than finding out what we’re responsible for in this life.

Each of us has the ability to open to “what am I?,” whatever the situation. There are tremendous opportunities to learn, to get out of the safe zone and into the regions that are more difficult. What’s important is to be uncontrived, not to have an idea, but to open up each moment to what’s going on right now. We may need to prepare the soil, but we always have the mustard seed. Nobody is ever born without it.

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The Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky

Living the Life of Charity

Brother Benjamin, OCSO

Once a young monk said to an old monk, “What is a monk?” The old monk answered him, “A monk is one who asks every day, ‘What is a monk?’”

The Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance is a branch of the Order of Cistercians, a monastic family of Roman Catholic monks and nuns which was founded in 1098 in France. In that year a small group of monks left the Benedictine Abbey of Molesme to build what they called simply the new monastery and to live quietly their monastic life. The Order has continued from that time until now with varying fortunes, and we now have houses of monks and nuns throughout the world. In the seventeenth century there was a further reform of our way of life which had its clearest expression at the Abbey of La Trappe in France; thus, our branch of the Cistercians came to be known popularly as the “Trappists.”

I have experienced Cistercian life as a unity of two opposites. The daily life of a monk or nun is highly scheduled, arranged in a series of moments of prayer, chanting, study, work, solitude, communal action, eating, and sleep. Within this schedule one moves gradually more and more freely, less and less tightly, more and more like a stream flowing, less and less obstructed by the pebbles on the bottom. Control and freedom. Discipline and liberty. At first, and even for some time, these can seem like two things. But are they really the same, or different?

What is it that one monk might say in a journal such as this to a readership which is generally Buddhist? I find

our traditions say one word very clearly: charity. Charity in its most classic root, *caritas*, the immediate and heart-felt going out to the other, the question “can I help?” There is no other purpose to our discipline, our training, our beliefs, our dialogue, our sitting, our meditations, our labors. There is no other root to the Gospel, and what other meaning is there to dharma? If the one next to you is cold, give him a coat. If she is thirsty, give some water. If you have nothing, what can you do? Find the answer to this question right away!

So why live in a monastery?

You have to live somewhere. I mean you have to do this thing called life in some concrete location every day, which is the location in which you find yourself. It is a great waste to begin thinking it needs to be done somewhere else. I may not have come to the monastery with this in mind at first, and I suspect the average man or woman who has set out in a Zen monastery may have his or her understanding jolted along the way, or for that matter every married man and woman as well, but right now and here I do find myself in a monastery and here I have this job to do.

There is, of course, a more metaphysical approach to our Cistercian monastic life. But it is a metaphysic that is also very grounded in everyday life, as is Zen monastic life as I understand it. A monastery is a microcosm. Living in a monastery for any extended period of time only intensifies this experience of the amazing “connect-

edness” of all of life. As I listen to others who come here on retreats, or friends who visit, I hear the same questions I ask myself. “Why am I here in this world?” “Why do we suffer as we do?” “Why am I (either loved or not loved, depending)?” And all of the usual interpersonal struggles of friends, acquaintances, spouses, and lovers, and the resulting confusions, pain, or joy. In the monastery we live these human questions within a very definite structure, one refined over centuries to blend work, prayer, and interaction with the Christian view of life and meaning.

This is not to say that it simply “works.” There is no magic to life, only life itself. Life in the monastery is only life and one makes it by getting up in the morning, making one’s way to the church to chant, to study, to work, to eat, to go to sleep.

I don’t think it would be of value to engage here in theology, except perhaps to say that, in my experience, to attempt to approach this style of life without a broad understanding which transcends the small self, the ego world, my opinions, desires, etc., is to ask for more confusion, suffering, and misunderstanding. Zen, in particular kong-an work, seems to lend itself very well to our monastic life. How? It requires doing it to know that. But I believe that living in a correct understanding, able to function correctly in each situation, is to participate fully in this moment in the living person of Christ.

Brother Benjamin lives at the Abbey of Gethsemani, a renowned Trappist monastery. □

Sitting

*A dampened zendo, poorly lit,
Long silence, the chugpi’s hollow hit;
This fine eve ’fore Kyol Che’s end,
The oldest nun returns to sit.*

*Outside the sounds of insects blend
To fill the darkness they attend;
The sitting woman doesn’t hear,
But feels their presence like a friend.*

*With gentle breath and heart sincere
She long outlasts the candle there;
Till suddenly in early morn,
The strangest sound through frigid air.*

*A floor board creaked with voice forlorn,
Just at the place where it was worn.
In recognition, mind was torn;
And something died, but what was born?*

Bob Powers

Do the Birds Still Sing?

*Do the birds still sing in China,
And do whiskered fish still play;
Do blue brooks still touch the willows,
That cascade along their way?*

*Do the hills still hide the morning,
Till each mossy crag lets go;
And the dew burns straight like incense,
From the ricelands’ gentle flow?*

*Do the cities fill with faces,
Each one bent, intent to run;
And do markets hum with business,
Smells of spices in the sun?*

*Do the young still talk of freedom,
And their songs still fill the air;
Do they meet and plan their future,
In Tiananmen Square?*

Bob Powers