

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.* □

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## 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