

On Becoming a Monk X X

I'm going to tell you a story and give you a poem that may help me to explain and you to understand how it happens that I became a monk. First the story.

Once there was a little salt doll. She was content to walk the solid ground of the land in which she lived. One day as she walked that solid ground she came to where it was no longer solid but flowing.

She bent and asked, "Who are you?"

"Touch me and find out," said the Sea.

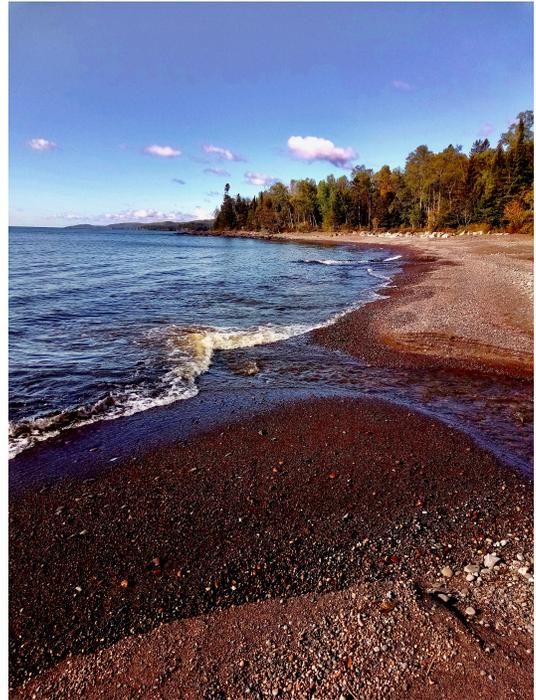
So she put her foot into the sea, and it felt wonderful and right. When she took it out, her toes were gone.

She said, "What have you done to me!"

"You wanted understanding so you gave a part of yourself," said the Sea.

She asked, "If I give more of myself will I understand more?"

"Find out for yourself," replied the Sea.

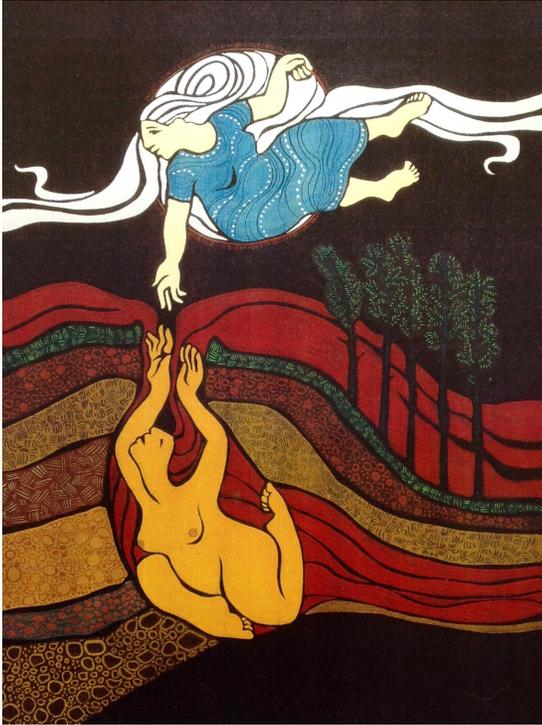


So, she put her leg in and again it felt wonderful and right but when she took her leg out it was gone up to the knee.

The little salt doll was a little frightened, but she wondered what would happen if she gave her whole self. So she went into the Sea and the deeper she went the more of her salt-self melted away and if a squall arose she kept on going until just as a wave washed over her for the last time she exclaimed,

"Now I know! We are one!"

This little wisdom story says as well as anything why I said ‘yes’ to becoming a monk, I who happen to be an old woman and a Catholic sister. Sometimes I tell the story to myself as one would to a child. Just for my own encouragement and to awaken what I desire. I believe that



deep down each of us is drawn, like the little salt doll, to something that is more than we can name. I experienced it sharply one night some years ago as I sat on the edge of my bed and heard myself say with some distress, “What am I going to do?” There was a deep pull that I felt was telling me to leave what I knew and go where I did not know. But here I was, an older woman and a catholic sister; I couldn’t just start over. It felt as if solid ground was giving way to something flowing and unstable. I didn’t understand what it all meant so I pretty much kept on going the way I was going which was good enough but not enough.

That began to change the day a spiritual friend asked me if I wished to learn a bit about Zen. I said Yes and dipped my toes into the sea. It felt right. The confusion and restlessness I was experiencing in my inner life began to lift and I was curious enough to continue. New beginnings are possible in any phase of life.

Continue I did when I participated in a weeklong Zen retreat at a Jesuit retreat house. I relished the solitude and silence, the chanting and rituals, the teachings. One day one of the speakers gave a simple reflection that so resonated in me that I asked if she would teach me. She said yes and I waded in. She became my teacher and that has made all the difference. She was tough and wise.

I went a little deeper when I said yes to the invitation to study and take the Precepts, a foundational practice in Buddhism. There was no doubt in my mind that I wanted to continue to put more of myself into this unknown; I didn't realize how deep it might get. There was the study and practice and sewing of the small robe that I would receive at ordination. When that day came I vowed as a Lay Buddhist Practitioner to train to keep the precepts, to strive to live into them, to do no harm and do only good as best I could. I was sprinkled with water, received the robe and given a new name. It was a happy day.

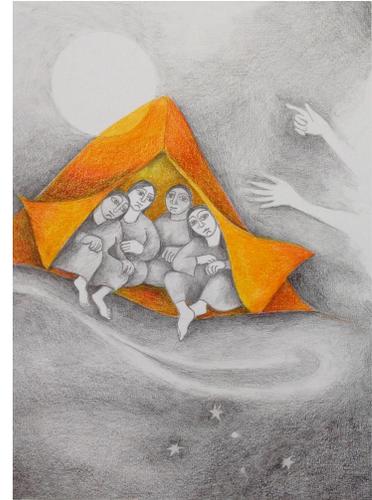
This practice is not without its squalls; like the time I threw anger at my teacher and verbally lashed out. My horror was profound and my actions unforgivable. So I thought. We met, Teacher and I, and when I started to speak of it, she only said, "It's your practice." Everything simply dropped away. It was as if it had never been. No word such as 'forgiven' was spoken but I felt a sense of forgiveness and lightness. Nothing was held against me; no judgement, not even a word of caution. A God moment channeled through one human to another. It was like the sea embracing whatever is put into it. I marked the date on a small white stone that sits on my altar. On it is written 'Everything is practice'.



The opportunity to train to become a monk arose and I was interested although not enthusiastic. Something was missing; there wasn't the same inner energy that was there during the Precept training. Like the salt doll there was a hesitation but I said yes anyhow and the training began. I found it to be strenuous and taking corrections was difficult for one who tends to be defensive and resistant. At one point I wrote in my notes that for me being a monk was an ambition not a call and I realized at some level, while hardly paying attention to it, that there was the hidden wish to belong to an 'elite' little group. Not long after that I stopped training. I was out.

At first there was a sense of relief but then came the grief. No longer did I have a tough but wise teacher. For three days I was miserable until finally I revealed to a trusted friend what had occurred. There was no pity, no advice, no attempt to take away my pain but just a friend's quiet listening and receiving. It was enough.

For the next nine months I bathed in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, that medieval classic whose author spoke directly to me across the centuries. There I found the same pearls of wisdom that I had scarcely begun to appreciate in my Buddhist studies. Feeling that familiar pull toward 'something' I again knew the need for a teacher who would understand. In humility I asked my former teacher if she would again be that for me. When she said yes a sense of gratitude filled me. I marked that day on a small gray stone that sits on my altar.



Some years before I had had a cancer. Now it returned and I asked myself how I wanted to spend the rest of my life. The answer was in the desire for more solitude and silence. The training to be a monk began anew. This time it was right; no longer a desire for a position of esteem but a raft to help carry me to where I want to go.

This practice is an intense one. It asks that the whole self let go. It demands withdrawal from being entangled in the external world that appears so solid and real and, as I see it, to become a stillness in the midst of the materialistic tsunami that inundates our world.

My teacher says it simply:

This practice is a contemplative practice not a Karma practice. To go into the world is not the main practice. One withdraws. If, however, there are times where you are called on to give, then, yes, give. It needs to be a selfless act and not one that comes from the ego.

It's true for all of us that we give, and we work...but the practice is not to get entangled in the world. Yes, give without reward, without anything in it for you.

Distance need not be an impediment and my ordination to be a monk took place on zoom. I enclosed a section of my small apartment to set up a sacred space, entered that space with a shaven head and she and I met face to face four hundred miles apart. The shaved head is an expression of gratitude but for me it takes a lot of getting used to.

At the heart of the ceremony were searching questions that called forth my willingness to commit to this particular practice of contemplation and withdrawal. “Yes, I said. “Yes, yes” as each question was asked. Until inside I heard myself say amid the yeses, “I’m giving my life away!” But another and stronger voice said, “Just Say Yes!”



I do not know exactly to what I said ‘yes’ but does anyone know what ‘yes’ holds for them as they commit to new life? I just know this: it is an act of faith; call it confidence. Confidence that the Sea would pull me more deeply into itself if I let it. Is this the answer to the question I asked

in the night years ago, “What am I going to do?” Is this an interior leaving of what I think I know to go to that which I do not know? Is this the slow melting of the ego-self like the little Salt Doll?

There is a slow but growing understanding that this practice is an act of generosity, a dropping of the ego self. I can't explain it but the whole thing is about love. Maybe it's like this: One day while going about my business, suddenly in a glance I saw what looked like a covering over all of creation and I understood at once that this was love, a universal Love without distinction or preference. Nothing left out. For a moment I felt it clearly in my being.

“So, this is what it's like’, I said. “This is what it is!”

I asked myself, is this the love we are meant to know? A love divine to be channeled through us to a starving world? Then I went about my business. But I go back to my questions and the answer is ‘yes’.



So after all that, what is daily practice like for me as a fairly new monk?

It's laundry and washing dishes and cleaning cat's litter box and grocery shopping and becoming more intentional in it all. It's catching myself more quickly when I misspeak, of resting because it's needed and not just being lazy. It's the slow transforming of the resistance I experience when called to generosity. It's study of the self for the sake of getting out of the way so the Unborn, Undying, Immutable can do IT's work. It is growing into giving without seeking reward. It's falling again and again and getting up even when you don't feel like it. It is solitude and solitude and more solitude so the ears of the heart can open to what it longs to hear. And silence, study, and stillness. It is about becoming dispassionate love that covers everything.

It is saying, "Yes."

And now here is the poem I promised at the beginning; it's the story of the salt doll contained in a drop. It is my story too, though unfinished.

Listen, O drop, give yourself up without regret and in exchange gain the Ocean.

Listen, O drop, bestow upon yourself this honor, and in the arms of the Ocean be secure.

Who indeed should be so fortunate? An

Ocean wooing a drop!

*In God's name, in God's name, sell and
buy at once.*

*Give a drop, and take this sea full of
pearls.*

Rumi



Lao Heshang Kaihu



May we with all beings realize the emptiness of the three wheels,
giver, receiver, and gift.

Author: Fashi Lao Yue

A SINGLE THREAD is not a blog.

If for some reason you need elucidation on the teaching,

please contact editor at: yao.xiang.editor@gmail.com



*Wisdom story told by Elaine MacInnis, Catholic Sister and Zen Roshi