

Life as a Monk on the Buddhist Path

I am a monk in A Single Thread Contemplative Order of Hsu Yun. Before discovering the Buddha Way, I sought fulfillment in my ordinary life, having lost touch with a spiritual orientation early on. But the pain of addiction to work and chronic anxiety were constant companions. I feared death and had found no solace for my existential dread in my materially rich middle years.

Encountering a form of mindfulness that had made its way into the psychotherapy community, I began teaching clients with trauma histories to remain in the present moment within our therapeutic interactions. This proved to be an effective tool and sparked a larger curiosity in me. Mindfulness and presence seemed more powerful than mere techniques and surprisingly difficult to sustain. Before long I was meditating regularly. Eventually, a teacher seemed like a good idea.

The moment I sat down across from she who is now my Buddhist teacher, with her shaved head and her full dark robes, I was in, all in. I rose out of bed early every Sunday to be on the cushion at 7 o'clock for three hours of meditation, ritual, work, tea, Dharma talks and discussion. I rose to the challenges of longer retreats and of sewing a robe and becoming lay-ordained. I kept rising to a deep inner call, one I came to realize had always been there.

After ten years of practice with my teacher and A Single Thread Sangha, my head was shaved, and I was ordained as a monk. The name I was given is Lao Huo Shakya, Old Fire Skyward.



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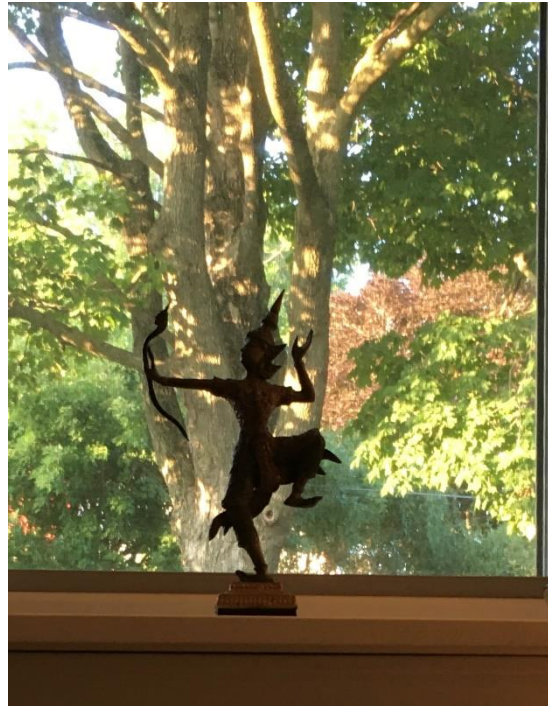
Having chosen to live as a monk, I began immediately to discover that the value of this path lies in walking through fire. Having my head shaved was stepping into the fire. I felt

vulnerable and exposed. Being bald seemed a harsh initiation, designed to push all my buttons! As with so much instruction in the Buddha Way, the act of shaving one's head accomplishes much more than words can ever say. From here, I could not will away or rationalize the vanity and arrogance that had me fuming about how I looked to others. My choice was to examine my reaction...or not. My teacher recommended a daily ritual of shaving my head: Lighting a candle, reciting a chant, then the clippers. And so, I did, under duress, submitting myself to my teachers' direction, tolerating the resistance until I could become curious about it.

Later, when asked to share the reasons why I had chosen to remain a monk, I would, without hesitation, refer to the teacher-student relationship as an unparalleled experience. The teachers' job is to recognize and expose the student's defilements so that the monk can examine these through the work of spiritual practice. The teacher is always there to be of service to the Dharma, not to the ego. She and I together work toward the aim we share: To know what is true, underneath the greed, hate and delusion of ordinary life. Where else can one whose efforts are sincere go to find such steadfast, honest, and uncompromising help?

During the first year of my life as a monk, a time of affliction about my choices, my teacher confronted me several times about teaching the dharma. I was attached to being a spokesperson for all that I had learned about this path. I felt the teaching role to be one of the few areas of this new life that made the difficulty of being a monk seem worthwhile. This was a defilement, clearly and simply put.

I was a novice monk, a beginner. I was not authorized to teach, and to do so was a serious violation. But even knowing this, I did not quit. I remained captive to my attachments. Monks are vowed to do no harm and to purify the mind of the ego's love for



knowledge and accomplishment. Clinging to such worldly sources of status and power results in actions that ripple out into the world, creating harm in ever-greater circles of consequence.

My teacher approached this obstacle to my spiritual development by insisting I stop and by clearly laying out before me the harm I had done by presuming to teach. She instructed me to consider carefully whether training to be a Buddhist teacher would be a more suitable path for me. This would mean going elsewhere as the A Single Thread Order of Hsu Yun is an order of contemplatives, not teachers. The choice was mine, stay, or go. I would be welcomed back any time, she added, if I decided to pursue the contemplative path. So, I left the Order. I chose to pursue a teacher training. It seemed a better fit.

I spent the following weeks lost in confusion. It was a blow to fully face the harmful consequences of my deeds. To see and know that one's actions have hurt others in ways that can never be undone must, first, be fully felt and understood. The novice seeker may travel through the dark world of blame, shame and avoidance before reaching the spiritual refuge of remorse and repentance. Having relinquished my relationship to my teacher, I was without a compass on this journey. I did not know where I was or where I was going.

I continued to follow a daily schedule of sitting meditation, study and contemplation and I found solace in the words of T.S. Eliot, from his poem, "East Coker:"

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.

Over and over, I turned to these words. Eventually, teachers did appear to guide me. There was Jiyu Kennett Roshi, the first western woman to train at a Soto Zen monastery in Japan, a powerhouse of Zen and the founder of Shasta Abbey in the California mountains. I discovered, in the archives of her dharma talks, a series titled "The Illusion of Illness and Death." (2) I listened to these talks repeatedly, taking notes, highlighting the notes, contemplating her words, sitting with her words.

She reminded me of the truths imbedded in the Buddhist wisdom tradition to which I was called; that it is exactly death, and life, and our fears about them both, that we are here to

learn from and recover from; that death does not have to be felt as a punishment. Life is a series of deaths that can teach us how to die without fear. But the practice of these great matters requires us to delve into our mistakes without blame so we can clean up the messes we make.

I recognized the sense of being punished that the Roshi described. Her words were an encouragement to stop blaming myself, stop blaming my teacher, and stop fearing this death-within-life. She helped me to turn the darkness of failure and disgrace into an opportunity. The turn I took led me toward the ego. There is where the light must be shone.

By exposing our mistakes, the teacher helps us to see the prideful, self-centered, and defensive tendencies of the ego at work. My desire to teach reflected deeper desires to stay in control, to remain above and aloof from being flawed, being human. I wanted to be a teacher so I would never have to stumble in the dark, not knowing. (3)



As the winter days went by, I found more teachings to guide me. Through her writings in “Defeat: A Short Zen Teaching,” (4) my teacher contrasted the afflicted defensiveness of humiliation with the humble willingness to relinquish pride. To be free, we learn to see and separate from the arrogance and self-importance that the ego clings to. The defeat of these powerful habits of mind can be realized when mistakes are openly acknowledged, and apologies offered. The energy of pride can soften into humility when we find the determination to admit and repent.

It is beyond the rational linear capacities of the intellect to fully know that it is our quest to be happy that makes us so miserable. Separating from the drive to be the brightest and best was a great relief and a powerful teaching. Thus is the spiritual power of defeat. The movement from affliction to peace. From self-deception to Truth.

And...it is a pitfall in monastic practice to consider such moments of illumination as a sign of anything in particular. We honor the moments of clarity encountered through practice by returning to life as it is, making our way carefully through the present as it unfolds before

us. Pride and arrogance require our ongoing commitment to live life with the utmost care, knowing that every fresh and new moment asks of us that we pay full attention!

Attachments to other people is an arena where we hope for comfort and certainty but where we are often disappointed and afraid. Here also, monastic practice teaches the monk to keep learning from the place where she finds herself.

During the time I was turning toward ordination as a monk, I was also cutting ties to my home of thirty-five years in the city of Chicago. My husband and I were newly retired and tired of city life. We dreamed of living where we could watch the light and the weather change, see the stars and hear the owls at night. Good friends agreed to share their meadow with us, a tiny house was procured, a solar system rigged.



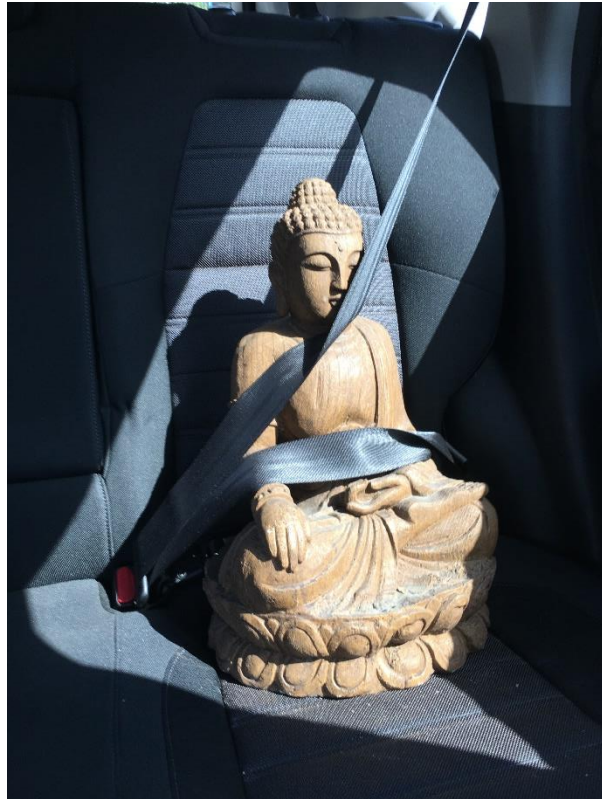
But our dream unfolded less than an hour's drive from my family-of-origin's home. I was convinced that my reasons for returning to the place I was raised had to do with my ties to the land. This tucked-away wedge of river valleys and high ridge-tops has been a solace through the initial back-breaking years of being a monk. I was determined to remain solidly independent of my family, so we stayed and eventually bought a small house not far from the meadow that drew us.

Leaving home to walk the monastic path, one steps off the seemingly solid ground of all the assumptions that are built up around the sense of self and others. Telling my 90-year-old parents and my two siblings who together with me are central to the support system that keeps the elders going, that I would be on retreat, in complete silence and solitude...for three

months...during the pandemic: This is one example of where my sense of duty and responsibility toward my family showed me its true colors. I felt torn in two. My teacher stayed the course. No, you cannot do both. You must choose.

My choice was to retreat and though it felt like jumping off the proverbial cliff, my family survived that winter without my help. The person I had helped was myself. In the quiet and solitude I could explore what I am underneath the familial roles of being responsible, reliable, a good person. I'm so lucky to have a teacher who held the line when I was so wobbly.

Helpfulness, when it is a static, habitual response, arises from the delusion that one is superior. It is disrespectful to always treat others as needy and unable to cope without guidance. Slowly I have pulled away from hovering over my family. I still help when I can, I still love them and care about them. My shaved head has helped all of us to know the depth of my commitment to something else; something inexpressible and inconceivable.



Withdrawal from these and other attachments to the material realm and the delusions that fuel them has been one of the gifts of the monastic path. In the solitude of the monastery, paying full attention becomes more and more concentrated, skillful. One's heart becomes softer, one's backbone firmer. Turning the tide of long-lived patterns takes time and patient practice, a teacher, and a willingness to keep stepping off the edge.

The experiences of being a monk include the necessary wildfires of reactivity that burn out of control, hot, dangerous, stressful. These fires are the suffering that is the truth of our human existence, the results of our reactive thinking and feeling dominating consciousness. The monk's life has guided me straight into the heat of the wildfires. Monks

are trained to know the heat of suffering intimately, with determination. Attention and care, remembrance of all that we know to be true, the willingness to be taught, to be wrong, to die to the old ways, changes us.



The monk's name I have been given, Old Fire Skyward, helps me remember that I am disciplining these fires of difficulty to travel skyward. I see this possibility most clearly in my teachers. Their flames burn with strong, steady, efficient energy. From them I feel the warm light of generosity and clarity, a kindness beyond any I had known. This transcendent capacity will be ours, too, when we are lifted out of the earthly habits that lock us into fear and want, our energies freed to reach upwards and unbounded, brightly illuminating.

Lao Huo Shakya

Footnotes

1. Painted rock by Lao Heshang Kaihu, Old Monk Flowering
2. Jiyu Kennett Roshi, "The Illusion of Illness and Death Series," 1978, <https://shastaabbey.org/houn-jiyu-kennett/>, accessed 11/22/2022.
3. Courtesy of J. Erik Gundersen

4. Shakya, Yao Xiang. Defeat: A Short Zen Teaching, copyright 2012. <https://www.amazon.com/Defeat-Contemplative-Practice-Zen-Teaching/dp/1477668918>.

All additional images courtesy of the author