

(This “short story” is lifted from my longer work, *Remember Me: My Short Life as a Monk*. Again, please feel free to email me at jimnuh@yahoo.com with your thoughtful comments. Thank you.)

Before I Was Christian

Raymond C. Geers

Due to my untutored and unorthodox trespassing into spiritual things, I was always as much impressed by Eastern as by Western monasticism. One of the foremost Eastern enthusiasts at the monastery, where I was living my college drop-out life, was a scrawny little fellow named Anthony, not to be confused with the novice “Anthony”, who had left the monastery months before. The scrawny Anthony wore glasses in front of dark puffy eyes and he had a small, elfin face framed by a scraggly beard. He was the gentlest of gentlemen in the monastery, the type of person who might pick up a wash-up worm and place it back in the grass after a heavy rainfall. This Anthony was one of the three full-time cooks of the monastery. I admired Anthony - and all the cooks really. There just seems to be something very contemplative about preparing food and offering nourishment to others. In the midst of their busy tasks, the cooks talked sparingly to one another but often with a great deal of humor. They were culinary artists, devotees of *Moose Wood Vegetarian* cook books, of bulk Bulgur grains and miso sauces and so many grain and bean concoctions that my old meat and potato head would spin. The cooks, in my opinion, were the heart and soul of the monastery.

Brother Anthony the cook was a veteran monk and a true son of the Rule of Saint Benedict, but he also looked to the spirituality of the other world religions for inspiration, especially to the ones that came as representatives to our monastery. He could keep himself as quiet as any good monk, even quieter than the others as he prepared food especially for the weaker brothers in our infirmary. But if you showed any interest in vegetarian recipes or in Eastern spirituality, Anthony's deep marble eyes would absolutely come to life and his hesitant voice would loosen up like a newly oiled chainsaw.

"It is just like the beatitudes Brother Adam!" he once exclaimed to me when I was assigned the job of helping him in the huge monastic kitchen.

"And when Jesus emptied himself on the cross he realized what the Buddha discovered under the Bodhi tree."

"But Brother Anthony, why then did the one man have to shed his blood while the other did not? Is it only personal enlightenment that Buddha attained? Or, like Christ, did he attain salvation not only for himself but for all of creation?"

"You are merely playing with words Brother Adam." he explained patiently. "What is enlightenment? What is salvation? They are simply words and of no value unless you experience for yourself what they point to. Our job as monks is not to compare and critique the spiritual experience of other people and say silly things like 'This is better' or 'This is no good.' No! Our job as real contemplatives and modern day seekers is to gather what is good from all people, from all cultures, like the bee gathers from many varieties of flowers and not only from one kind. Why do we do this? Because truth..." He paused and smiled to himself – "is a many-splendored thing!" Anthony was almost singing now. "We are to store these things, Brother Adam". He pointed to his chest then. "In our hearts... Just as Mary did... and Jesus did, and as all wise men and women have done down through the ages." He paused again, as if he were about done with human speech and was ready to return again to Trappist silence. But first he glanced at me hard. "Store and share them..." He smiled an almost beatific smile. "And their sweetness increases when you share them."

Why would I argue with him? Christianity was a "come back faith" to me after a prolonged adolescent abandonment. The portal back for me was the more mystical, eastern door of the Catholic faith. The first book I ever read by Thomas Merton was entitled *Mystics and Zen Masters*. But my novice master, Father Francis Kline, saw only distractions in what to him were only ambivalent pollinations from

the East. Maybe he had an allergic reaction to them in the past, I don't know, but to Francis the almost out of control profusion of inter-religious cross-pollinations in our day only invited distractions from the authentic truth most securely discovered in the words and experiences of our own ancient traditions. He tried to reason with me during one of our novice to novice master sessions together. It was alright, he said, for me to join Anthony and a few other younger monks in meditating cross-legged on the floor of the chapter room after mass.

“How you pray, Brother Adam is not as important as why and to whom. The activity of praying is merely the paddling of the boat, an immensely tiresome activity when one is, as you seem to be, locked up on dry land. But put your boat out on deeper waters and see how the paddling of prayer changes.”

“I've been paddling for a year now and don't seem to be getting anywhere.”

“Debatable. In any case, a year is not a long time...” And I knew he was right.

“You are impatient Brother Adam.”

Absurdly impatient - only twenty three years old now and in a hurry to get tight with God before I died.

“What about living now, in the present? The water will come and surround you with its love if you wait patiently for it, for him, to take you in a little bit at a time. But if you refuse to give God the initiative and go searching elsewhere you risk going further away from the water while paddling furiously in the wrong direction.”

His words went in my ears and got blocked by ear wax, I guess, because I couldn't hear them as anything but irritating sounds. For the first time in a year of novitiate life, Francis and I stood on two different islands. The words between us seemed to come from an ocean apart.

So when the Korean Zen Master Seung Sahn came for his annual visit to Gethsemani and I asked to participate in the weekend long *sesshin*, or intensive Zen Buddhist retreat, Fr. Francis was initially irritated by the idea. I argued that religious ecumenism, which involves mutual appreciation and dialogue

between religions and cultures, was a charism of our religious house, especially since the days of Thomas Merton. Several of the professed monks were participating, including Brother Samuel, Brother Benjamin and Brother Anthony the cook. My fellow novice Brother Gabriel had already received Father Francis' okay to go on the retreat and, in the end, so was I.

The retreat took place in the family guest house. Zen Master Seung Sahn arrived with a small entourage of maybe a half dozen people, some dressed in light gray robes like the master himself, others in regular clothes like jeans and t-shirts. One woman, probably the same age as me or a little older, wore a dark gray robe over her clothes and seemed rather somber, as if she had just buried a loved one. The other members of the visiting group were quiet and courteous. Smiling and keeping themselves in the background seemed their entire role while the master Seung Sahn took center stage as the animated, almost comical, ambassador from Korean Zen.

The master seemed to be completely at ease and in good health as he walked into the large carpeted meeting room holding a hiking stick in his left hand and a handkerchief in his right to mop the perspiration off his forehead. Father Michael had just taken Master Seung's group on a walking tour up to Merton's hermitage, a mandatory trip for any VIP to Gethsemani. Now he was introducing Master Seung Sahn to the monks gathered there. To me he seemed like a visiting professor from another world.

Master Seung Sahn was a rotund little man with a shaved, sun-tanned head. His eyes were obscured by the reflection from the light from his large metal framed aviator glasses. On top of his gray robe he wore an orange vest-like garment which gave a warm and almost festive appearance to his body. Master Seung Sahn did not seem unusually wise - don't bother to ask me how a wise person must look, I had no way of knowing. I couldn't help it, and maybe it was Father Francis' fault for poisoning my simple acceptance of the Korean Zen Master. My first impression was that all of this smelled slightly of the fake, or at least of the somewhat pretentious, as if someone was deliberately trying to fool us. The master smiled continuously as he talked. Here before me was a man so familiar with bliss that the realities of life

had no more hardness for him. Sharp things surely would not cut such a man and hot things would not burn - or if they did burn - the burn would feel cool to such a man as he. That's the impression I got from looking at Master Seung as he shared with us his simple message, so simple even a child could understand it.

"I can sum it up in two words" he said. *'Don't know'*. The potential for enlightenment is in everyone. But you must not think you already know what enlightenment is. And you must not think you already know what enlightenment is not!" He laughed deeply with an old man's kind of glee – "HA! HA! HA!" – with a smile beaming through the smoothness of his face. "The truth, rather, is this: *you don't know!* As you sit in meditation, (he glanced at the four younger monks - Benjamin, Samuel, Gabriel and me), your mind will run and jump around, like a monkey in a tree, from one thing to the next, never at rest. While you meditate - rest only in this: *Don't know!* What about God? You say. What about Jesus? *Don't know! Don't know!* Is there peace? Can one finally rest in love? You must keep meditating. Go deeper and deeper into this *'Don't know'.*"

So, like a dutiful Buddhist monk, I sat for hours on my buckwheat cushion, my knees and ankles aching, my eyes - like magnifying glasses - bent full force on piercing the materialism of my mind. My vision bore holes into the circle of tweed carpet immediately in front of me. Finally! I was going to be able to fulfill the earnest quest to be *questing* formally. Like a samurai monk, I was beating a path towards enlightenment. Such a heady thing - to be given opportunity to participate in a dream come true, one which had hung around me since I was a teenager reading Alan W. Watts and *The Way of Zen*. I *flung* myself into meditation - as if it were a war! The battleground was in me and around me - in this quiet room. In this *almost* quiet room - where someone else's nose, (so close by - maybe Gabriel's?), whistled in and out with each breath. I would fight against illusion and misconceptions. I would fight... I would fight the whistling nose! Yes, I would fight. Above all, I would fight against myself and the egotistical urge, so hard to conquer – this crazy urge to fight!

But, after half a day, I wasn't getting anywhere. No great insight, no fantastic "eureka!" And no entrance to perfect knowing like the calm smile on the face of nearly every Buddha you ever see.

Eventually it became my turn for *dokusan* - a private audience with the Zen master. Another dream comes true! Didn't I seek such an audience on the day I wandered into the woods of Gethsemani back when I was seventeen on my high school senior retreat? Master Seung Sahn must have sensed my lack of enlightenment, so he gave me the recipe over again.

"Think only '*Don't know!*' Brother Adam. When new thought comes into your mind, say only '*Don't know!*'"

I couldn't help asking him the Jesus vs. Buddha questions which plagued my mind.

"Master, why did Jesus have to die on a cross and not the Buddha?"

"All men die" said Master Seung. "But quick! Answer me this: What were you before you were Christian?"

I hesitated, and before I could speak the master signaled the end of our private talk with the ringing of a little bell. I was appalled that he would end our session in this way! But what could I do? We exchanged bows and I rose from my kneel-sitting position and joined the others who were now doing walking zazen, slowly and in single file, around the room. Sandalwood incense was burning, and monks east and west were quiet as a pin, slowly, slowly moving in a great meditating circle. Blood was moving normally again to stiff knees and ankles, but I was too absorbed to be thankful. In and out I kept breathing the proscribed words:

"Don't know..."

Don't know...

Don't... know...

What would Father Francis say about this?

Don't know.... Don't... know...

What was I before I was a Christian?

What am I now?

Don't know... Don't...

Why does that woman in the dark gray robe seem so sad?

No... Don't know...

Wonder if I could help her?

But how can a novice monk help a sorrowful young woman?

Don't know...

Don't know..."

Gradually my mind began to wander like a party that gets itself separated from the larger group...

We were all back in our sitting meditation positions. Gabriel was ten feet across the floor from me, half-kneeling on a prayer stool constructed by Brother Joachim. On either side of me sat Brothers Samuel and Benjamin. We were all youngish monks, under forty, and open to both tradition and to the winds of change in the church and in the world. Father Michael the vocation director was there, as sincere and as unassuming as when I first met him almost two years ago.

Sometimes I wondered if I could know Michael better, or any monk for that matter, who was as nice as him. I wished that I could get past the detached, monastic, brotherly well-wishing love and simply have a friend. I had been twelve months at Gethsemani, but I had no real friend! Father Francis seemed to discourage my natural instinct to be friendly with others. He was to be my best friend and confidant. He warned me not to go off alone in the woods with anyone without his permission. In the back of this warning I assumed there was a concern about possible sexual misbehavior. Who might be safe and who might not be? It kind of sickened me to imagine this of my fellow monks. But maybe I misread Father Francis' warning. God was supposed to be a monk's best friend, wasn't he? Would I lose sight of this primary relationship if I got too much involved with the cares and affections of others? Prior to my

coming to Gethsemani this would not have been an issue. In my large family of eleven people I was constantly surrounded by other human beings. As time went on, my best friends were given to me, really, without any effort on my part - on my street, in my school and in my places of work. I just never appreciated friendship so much before - back when I was constantly seeking to find time and space to be alone. I didn't realize then that being alone only gained its charm for me because I was so deeply imbedded in communities of people. Yes, the folks in community sometimes drive you crazy. This is a given. But this very craziness - I discovered - can also propel you, like a boomerang, back to the neglected prayer life and back into that primary relationship with the Big Cahoon, the Lord of Lords, the very Prince of Peace who is the "Only One", Father Francis advised me, who sets us free to be ourselves, whether alone, partnered or in a crowd.

Instead of shooing me away from relationships with other monks, I thought Father Francis would have been wiser to encourage me to develop them. No doubt, I would have found God in a more congenial way than I had so far in a year's duration. I wouldn't be wasting my time sitting on a hard floor saying "*Don't know... Don't know*". Of course, participating in this retreat and my going into the monastery was my idea, not Father Francis'! But part of me still wanted to hold him responsible for driving me to this. This satori-seeking stuff was an almost masochistic mental gymnastics. There I was, trying to get past a sense of self that every wisdom figure that ever walked the face of the earth already slipped us the secret about long ago: it's only an illusion dude! It just isn't all that easy to accept this.

Near the end of the retreat a meal was served - sort of a reward for all our shadow-boxing efforts. It was delicious- oriental rice and fish served out of glazed ceramic bowls with cleverly cut vegetables and exquisitely flavored sauces. I'll say it again: There just seems to be something very contemplative about preparing food and offering nourishment to others. I think Brother Anthony went all out in preparing this feast. The Master Seung Sahn complimented the cook after eating his portion completely, which is the Korean tradition. I noticed that the woman in the dark outfit was still as sullen near the end of the

retreat as she had been at the beginning. She was a Caucasian woman with brown hair hanging at shoulder length. It seemed to me that a smile could perhaps redeem her face from what my unenlightened eyes considered its basic unattractiveness. But she wouldn't smile; maybe couldn't smile. It was a mystery to me. She sat to the left of the master Seung as he told us a story about an ancient Zen master.

“There was once a Zen Master who met a young woman near his mountain hermitage. This young woman had given up all her family and friends - all that knew her and cared for her, in order to follow the precepts of Buddha. She had made a pilgrimage up the mountain in order to ask the holy man to help her to find the answer to enlightenment.”

This was the beginning of the story, and I must confess that I no longer remember all the details that Master Seung Sahn elaborated in telling it. But there was a part of it that struck me in terms of the unsmiling woman and of myself. Somewhere in the story - I wish I could remember it fully! - the master challenges the woman to seek enlightenment not so much by living like an emotional rock, but by realizing the *Zen*, the enlightenment, of being a flesh and blood human being. It was the only thing the master had said all weekend that made any sense to me. I looked at the unsmiling woman to see if the story affected her in the same way it affected me. Was the story meant for her? Surely since she was one of his followers the master knew what she was like and, if he had any perceptiveness, which I suppose he did, he must have known that there was something seriously wrong with her spiritual quest if it made her seem so unhappy.

A good monk practices what is called “custody of the eyes” in order to keep his thoughts from wandering into distractive flights, especially around members of the opposite sex if he has a weakness in this area, as I certainly did. But I was never the model monk no matter how I tried or what my best intentions were. Consequently, I looked at this woman, whose name I did not know, for a very long time after the story had been told and even after the conversation of the table moved on to other things.

Exteriorly, her face had not changed. The mask was still of the quality of stone, chiseled with the pain of a life I was not privy to. I almost prayed that she would break down right then and there and let loose whatever it was that kept her so cold and empty, but I didn't spot so much as a tear or a mist upon her eyes. Her bottom lip was determined, as she was determined, about who she was - more so than I was about who in the hell I was. She was locked into it, whatever it was that made her the way she was, while at the same time I noticed myself becoming somehow unlocked. All of this seemed to happen so quietly and to remain invisible to the others who were sitting there in that guest house kitchen where only twelve months ago I ate my last meal with my Mom and Dad and sister and brothers. Something quite small had begun to happen in me that would change everything I was living for. I had no way of knowing how at the time.

When it was time to leave the guest house and to part company with the Zen master and all his party, I felt the urge to break out, for once, from my monastic reserve. We were all smiles as we stood and said our goodbyes. The retreat had ended with the celebration of the Eucharist, as most Catholic retreats do. I was surprised when at communion all participants were offered the consecrated bread and wine of the Body and Blood of Christ. Master Seung Sahn partook in this ritual sacrament with perfect grace and respect as did the other guests who had come with him; all except the unsmiling woman. As we were about to leave, I reached out and put my arms around her in a spontaneous hug which surprised me as much as it probably surprised her. I wondered afterward how much it surprised the others, especially my monastic brothers. Why did this stranger, who also happened to be a woman, mean anything to me that I should give her a hug? She did not return my affection nor did she resist it. This spontaneous embrace of a stranger was a red flag signaling change which welled up from something deeper than my former hopes and dreams. She began to melt a little, the woman who had been so cold. You could see it in her face. I was melting too, and withal, my entire monastic world.