

Reaching Agapia

by

Ajahn Sobhano

Kabir says: Student, tell me, what is the house of God?

It is the breath inside the breath.

[This, the last in the series of extracts from my journey through the Balkans in 1994, describes the second half of the walk through Romania. My travelling companion, Paul Shaw, joined me in Timisoara. (The 'first' Paul who had accompanied me Greece to Macedonia had returned to England from Skopje). Our ultimate destination was Ionaseni, an orphanage in northern Moldavia for mentally and physically handicapped children supported by the charity, Scottish European Aid. The Agapia communities are part of a chain of monasteries that stretch up the Moldavian side of the Carpathians into Bukovina and the Ukraine].

1st of July 1994 – Sighisoara

Letter to John and Radmilla Hermmann

We are at the half way point in our journey across Romania and the temperature has gone up a degree or two just to add to what is turning out to be the most challenging part of the trip. We have no other Buddhist contacts here so all our help has come from the S.E.A. group in Botosani, who sound enthusiastic, but so far they have only contacted us once. The result is that we have had to learn a little Romanian, which is no bad thing. Paul however is showing signs of buckling under the strain of living the homeless life. One realises that the monastic training is a great preparation. In a sense both Pauls are going through the same experience as anyone coming into monastic life, except without the spiritual supports of the monastery. Living with little, giving a lot. But he is prepared to keep going, and while suffering from exhaustion, culture shock and complete loss of control of his personal life, is still willing and helpful.

Romania is in very bad shape economically with high unemployment, low pay and high prices. The people of course are wonderful, fascinated to meet a wandering mendicant, and completely accepting. The last part of the walk has been through the Saxon villages between Sibiu, Brasov and Sighisoara. Although most of the last Germans who lived through the communist era, (Ceausescu 'sold' most of them off to Germany - ruining the carefully tended lands with commune farming), have since also gone, there is a comforting familiarity to be in contact with the traces of a culture that is closer to our own. We stayed a night with a Lutheran pastor, and were offered the meal the next day by a young German deacon at another church in the next valley. Although on the evangelical side, they are much easier to relate to than the Orthodox priests, emphasising the more personal, human centred aspect of Christ that has so strongly conditioned our own culture. They also gave us an introduction to an Irishman who is helping to run a German-sponsored programme at an orphanage close to here.

We are resting now for a few days in the gentle surroundings of Sighisoara, staying with a retired couple, the Popovic's, who are the parents of people who work closely with SEA in Botosani. They don't speak any French, German or English and our Romanian doesn't stretch to after-dinner conversation. However we are managing to imbibe large doses of warmth and friendliness that makes the language barrier seem unimportant. Sighisoara is a medieval guild town with fortification erected to keep out the marauding Turks, and many of the original buildings still intact. It has one of those clock towers with revolving figurines that emerge on the hour and is the birth place of Vlad the Impaler, otherwise known as Count Drac!

With all best wishes

Sobhano

2nd July – Christor Secuiesc – Morning

We left Sighisoara in the heat and dust, walking several miles to the outskirts before we were picked up by a Hungarian driver who took us all the way to Christor. Kiron, an Irishman who worked at the Copan de Copii (orphanage)

here has gone home and instead we are welcomed by Andreas and Thomas. Andreas has blond hair and a pigtail, Thomas – a clear complexion and a trusting heart. They live in a one room flat with all their *objets trouvés*. What is rubbish, what is art? The two merge effortlessly. Piles of Gunter Grass, Henry Miller and Herman Hesse. Siddhartha open on page 100. A Buddhist monk for tea. A walk in the fields. We took our gear to a guest flat a few blocks away. Accompanied by our new friends we feel protected. The evening light softens the street life...children crawling out of every hole, cafés brimming with laughter, a breeze of amazement as I pass in the half light. And I am happy to have arrived out of the blue into their world. They are interested in learning about meditation so we return to their flat, but it is late. It is amazing though how much can be communicated when there is no time.

Next day

This morning we listened to reggae over breakfast with the young German couple staying in the flat with us. After, we went to visit the orphanage, 450 children in a single four-storey building. It is thought to be one of the biggest in Romania, which also means they can siphon off more aid. Everything certainly *looks* spick and span, walls freshly-painted and the kids are wearing new trainers, enough perhaps to satisfy the casual observer that their money's being spent on something. Unfortunately we have already met the director, a tyrannical drunk. And the children clamour for love. They hold your hands, your clothes and look at you as though asking you to put a price on their love. "I'm only ten years old and I want you to be my Daddy". It tears into you and you feel wonderful and terrible at the same time. Because there's somebody in the world for whom you make a difference (being needed fills a hole in my heart too) which doesn't change the reality that in these circumstances you could never take away their loneliness, however hard you tried. Without even the hope for love the older kids grow hard and angry, watching MTV on satellite in the recreation room.

Andreas and Thomas have one small games room at the back of the building. That's it. They try to stop the teachers from beating the kids but they are nothing in this outfit. The kids obviously adore them. They take them out camping and walking and show them Western things, try to stimulate their malnourished sense of creativity, but there are too many kids and too few of them to really make a difference. I think they know that they're in over their heads. Thomas is disjointed with anguish as we leave, because he feels he has treated them like animals by bringing us to look at them as though they are in a zoo. His love for them is tearing him apart and he has nothing left for himself. He has given himself away and he doesn't know it yet.

Found in Andreas and Thomas' flat:

Weich ist starker als hart

Soft is stronger than hard

Wasser ist starker als Fels

Water is stronger than a rock

Liebe ist starker als Gewalt

Love is stronger than violence

Brecht

9th July – Sihastria Monastery

Lying in a wooden cell about six feet by twelve feet. It is raining. A little light appears at the window into the corridor, but apart from that we are in darkness. The room is entirely made of wood panelling. It is new, warm and fresh. My legs and knees have spasms so I rest fitfully. Occasional rages of Romanian voices reverberate from what sounds like a kitchen below. We spent last night at Secu monastery, the first of the Agapia Monasteries, Sihastria being the second with Sihla a skite, the third which we hope to visit in the morning.

We arrived at Monasteria Sihastria in the morning. At first it seemed as though it was smaller than Secu, a lower wall and a tinier collection of steeples and towers. The architecture was both fantastic and practical. If the monastery had been situated anywhere else, it would have seemed contrived.

It was obviously a later development than Secu, built during an age when twenty-foot thick walls were redundant. The *biserica* with its elongated eaves, wide enough to fit a congregation, the fluted columns of the voluminous *trapezery* (dining hall) porch and the design of the surrounding chapels and cloisters all spoke of an awareness of balance and scale. No structure more remarkable than the other and yet each in their own way unique. This harmony of form, combined with the apparent random development of the site itself, indicated a spiritual continuity that must have evolved out of the fluctuating conditions of the time, in contrast to the grandiose gestures of largesse that leave so many monastic communities lumbered with edifices that are out of proportion to the needs of their daily life.

As we entered the monastery grounds we could hear the voice of a sermon being broadcast into the compound as the congregation was overflowing from the church onto the lawns and surrounding buildings. A group of monks were standing on the gabled porch of the first buildings we reached. Without having to identify myself in any way, a few of them peeled off to fetch Father Spiridon, a slight monk with a wispy beard and fine, aquiline features. It all happened so discreetly, and without any of the usual reaction of bewilderment I was used to that I wondered whether they had received advance warning of my arrival. It was easy enough to imagine that this was possible, even natural. After all Sihastria was one of the two monasteries recommended to me by Metropolitan Daniel¹, or perhaps the monks at Secu had mentioned it in one of any number of daily communiqués that must pass between the monasteries. But I preferred to think that it was simply an expression of monastic hospitality.

Father Spiridon spoke the kind of halting English acquired from the painstaking study of books, lacking the easy fluency of the spoken word. Much of his reading was of the kind of esoteric theosophy that had been fashionable in the West during the twenties and thirties. While I was reluctant to be identified with that kind of outlandish spirituality - a potent mix of Indian mysticism and astral orienteering, it was the best connection we had had so far.

He was at his most courteous though when we reached the chapel that was in his charge.

The interior had been painted in the 40's by a Ukrainian artist who, knowing he would be unlikely to live to see the completion of the project, had taken full vows as a monk before starting. The walls and ceiling were covered in a precisely arranged series of frescoes. On the *iconostasis*, scenes from the Bible and portraits of the apostles and the Church Fathers were depicted in their usual order in the hierarchy. The whole room, which couldn't have been much bigger than five metres by three, was partially divided at the centre in the space usually reserved for the biggest icons. On one side a life-sized portrait of the Virgin Mary grieving the loss of her son and on the other, Christ during his last hours on the cross, his eyes bleak pools of suffering.

Although the artist had kept to the classical iconographical themes, even the untrained eye could not have ignored the unusually modern treatment of the images. It must have marked the high point of the development of 'Renaissance' iconography, a kind of Twentieth Century photorealist baroque, before the return to the purer forms of traditional iconography. With backdrops of steaming clouds, bodies swathed in luxuriant folds of primary blues and reds, faces dramatically animated, it could so easily have descended into a kind of High Church kitsch. Paul certainly thought it had, but the sheer skill of the painter, the subtlety of gesture, the extraordinarily life-like treatment of skin, the intense detail, the extent of it and more than anything else the sheer joy that this had been the artist's final act of devotion, couldn't fail to take my breath away. Father Spiridon took his duties seriously and we listened attentively (I think partly out of sheer relief to be given so much favourable attention by a monk) as he explained each scene, from the nativity to the ascension, as though we were hearing them for the first time. And perhaps we were.

The rain pauses outside to become a soft descent rather than a thunder. The gutter streams water onto the porch directly behind the wall to my right. Paul reads from *Sammasatiati*² the Buddha's teachings on Right

Mindfulness, the one word that can summarise the teaching of the Buddha. That which focuses, investigates, measures and finally abandons sense objects. That which makes the mind pristine, pliable, yielding and open. Here in this room - the scent of pine. Mindfulness. No more than this.

10th July – Piatra Neamt

Finally have a moment, and a table to record some of the impressions of the last few days. A tumultuous rush of images, energies, torments and ecstasies. But with the monastic backdrop, the weariness is always balanced by the presence of their ancient calm - that nourishes the heart and recollects the mind. This is but one of many characteristics that brings to mind the Forest monasteries of North-East Thailand³. Here also you have a largely peasant population supporting (and being supported by) an authentic and rigorous monastic life, drawing huge numbers to their activities. This creates an enormous potential for spirituality in the whole society. It was only at Sihastria however that we were able to draw close to the source of it all - the Master. Sitting in a low pavilion attended by a couple of younger monks, an ancient wizened old man, flowing white beard and fierce eyes, receiving a party of lay-people. The scene could have been straight out of Thailand. Absolutely the same dynamic, a kind of fearful reverence for the one who speaks from the ground of being, and whose gentleness somersaults the heart.

On our last morning at Sihastria we visited Sihla Skite. After about an hour's walk through the forests above the monastery we came to the settlement of sturdy farm buildings next to an old wooden church. The front entrance way was jammed with rows of shoes, indicating that they were in the middle of a service. Inside there was a rich glow of light from the candles. All the brothers had come to their Office in their working robes. Bent or crouched in prayer, their bearded profiles peeked out from behind cornices in the wall. A few of them fighting a losing battle with drowsiness (a familiar experience to all who have endured the repetitiveness of monastic life); I felt closer to them for that.

The small space where we were standing was crowded with the faithful, mostly farm-folk from the look of their swarthy sun-burnt faces. The whole setting was straight out of a Grimm's fairy-tale. An image from the depth of the mind that one instantly recognised, and at the same time knew to be extraordinary. To discover that, here in this little skite, was a little circle of the sacred protected by its own obscurity.

Our arrival however had not gone unnoticed. I felt like I had intruded onto their secret. There was no time for me to explain who I was (I didn't want to anyway), to ignore the suspicious glances of the intoning monks or the discomfort of those I was standing by. I withdrew to leave with the sinking feeling I had experienced so often before: the feeling that I didn't belong, that my very presence was alarming to these people. I had thought I was quite used to my alien status, but at that moment I was only aware of a kind of sorrow that was out of all proportion to the situation.

I tried to reason with myself. What after all was the problem? The monks of Sihastria and Secu had been more than kind to us - they had been genuinely welcoming. Surely it would only be a matter of time before they got used to my robes? If I could be patient with things. But it was this childhood association, the recognition of something lost and found and yet unreachable. I had forgotten how as a child there *had* been some kind of unspecified belief in a great and loving Father in the sky. The inability to recreate that innocent faith, which I could witness to all around me, served to highlight my present unbelief. What puzzled me was that I hadn't understood this before, and why the grief? I tried to remember: when had I stopped believing? There was such an imperceptible spread of forgetting over those years of growing up that it can hardly be called a loss of faith, rather a slow dawning that the world was a hostile place, a world in which I was alone. But I had never made a conscious choice to reject God, or thought of his absence as any kind of loss. Until now.

I couldn't really make sense of any of this, I was only aware of a desire to escape from what was beginning to feel like a crushing weight of all these contradictory emotions; the frustration of being so close to this rich mine of

spirituality without being able to touch it, angry at myself for caring, angry with Paul for not caring. I knew it was time to get out.

To get back down to Sihastria we had to follow the footpath past St. Theodora's cave. Among the other miraculous stories Father Spiridon had told us about, the story of St. Theodora was one of his favourites. She had come to Sihastria some time in the 18th Century, perhaps to live as a nun. Certainly it was an unusual kind of vocation. At any rate, after a time she disappeared. Nothing more was heard of her until one day, 16 years later, some of the monks at Sihastria noticed a large number of birds collecting bread crumbs from their tables all flying in the same direction towards the forests by Sihla Skite. Eventually word got around that something quite out of the ordinary was taking place and the monks set out to discover the source of the mystery. Sure enough they found that the birds had indeed been taking their leftovers to St. Theodora in her cave in the cleft of the rocks.

About a kilometre into the forest depths below Sihla, within the great rock-mass beneath, a cleft opened up to reveal the entrance to the cave. We crept under the low rock that formed the entrance-way. A few yards within the narrow corridor the space opened up into a kind of vaulted chimney. Against the wall facing us was a low, slightly sloping shelf of rock covered with blackened wax from centuries of devotional offerings. There were still some candles giving off a dull glow, to which we added a few more from the stack of fresh ones at the side. Paul and I sat wordlessly. The silence itself was refreshing. Anonymous. I didn't know anything about St Theodora, but I liked to imagine that she too had come here to escape from rites and rituals, or to go beyond them. It seemed absurd that the Church doctrine should get between our sweet communion in silence.

13th July – Neamt Monastery

It was an overcast day, but in the cool country air we were able to ease ourselves out of the stresses of our previous day's visit to Piatra Neamt, the

regional town centre. Stopping by a well, I removed my rain gear, preparing inwardly and outwardly for our next encounter with the Orthodox faith. Memories of our time around Sihastria had dissipated and I was once more relieved to be returning to the rarefied airs of the monastic refuge. Glad to be reaching Agapia. To be reaching the top of the low hill where we could see the towers of the fortifications rising over above the village, spread out beneath it. There was Agapia, a profusion of wooden cottages, rattling old balconies and porches, rickety steps and freshly painted duckboards. A veritable town of monastics. Nuns' washing hung out to dry. Nuns with milk-churns hanging from both shoulders hurried back from the fields in the dying light. A nun waiting for no one, in a little cubicle half-way up the cobbled road, selling postcards. And finally the gates that take us into the monastery itself. In the centre the *biserica*, blocking out the sky. And then we see them - the geraniums - hundreds of them; purple, red and white geraniums, pot touching pot the length and breadth of the three tiers and on all four sides of the cloistered balconies.

Father Spiridon had given us an introduction to Sister Maria Balan. Having become a nun later in life she had previously worked in the Department of Foreign Trade, hence her excellent English. Although slightly reserved, she struck us as being both sensitive to our needs, uncannily anticipating our desires, while also maintaining a strict precision with all her dealings. This didn't seem distancing, but respectful. We were taken to some rooms on an upper storey of the cloistered square. Again that same richness of colour and freshness of smell, which never failed to remind me of the spiritual poverty of the world we had left behind.

We slept the sleep of the dead, and in the morning shared breakfast in the elegant chambers reserved for guests and visiting Metropolitans. I spoke over breakfast with a friend of Sister Maria. It turned out to be one of the few moments when I felt there had been a true meeting of minds. At first I had to wade through the usual preconceptions of those who have a limited knowledge of Buddhism without understanding its application. Sister Maria stood slightly

apart, without displaying any apparent interest she was obviously listening intently. A visiting German Protestant sat boggle-eyed at the simultaneous vision of the Orthodox and Buddhist representatives undermining, clarifying and reinforcing each others positions.

Taking the form of questions and answers, I attempted to explain the nature of Buddhist devotion, the paradox of a 'relationship' with an impersonal divine force and the practice of self-surrender, (dying to the self as being central to our practice). The idea of merging with the Dhamma as the alternative to the Christian concept of grace: i.e. as we let go of defilements by confronting them, there is an inner, unconditioned, response of acceptance, healing and forgiveness that is the action of the illuminated heart.

The mood of the breakfast carried over into a tour of the monastery. The main building that we were in was of a design typical of the monastic sites I had visited throughout the Balkans. Due to the size of the community, most of the nuns lived beyond the walls of the fortifications in smaller cottages in the surrounding villages. Only the very junior nuns, or those with administrative or craft work, would be situated in the main building, and even they would very often be living relatively self-sufficient lives. It was an unusual synthesis of autonomous and communal co-existence. The church was the central hub of their lives, however nuns could choose which services to attend in consultation with their *starets*.⁴ It is easy to idealise such situations, I'm sure no community this size is without its internal wrangles, but they were obviously doing something right as there was a long waiting list for vocations.

We were taken first to the exhibition galleries on the first floor cloisters. The most interesting rooms however were the last, an exhibition of Romanian writers and poets who, over the centuries, had come to Agapia to work in the houses and cottages that belonged to their mothers, sisters and perhaps even former wives. Most impressive of all were the craft workshops, which they took very seriously as they were one of the major sources of income for the community. There were rooms containing giant carpet looms, a well equipped icon studio and in the last workshop we visited, the knitting factory.

When we asked what their working hours were, Sister Maria abruptly replied, "this is not work, it is prayer." From the composed industriousness of the nuns, I could believe it.

We left the group to join the morning mass. The Church was so packed there was only limited room at the back of the long gallery, at the other end of which stood the plain white altar set against the golden iconostasis. The frescoes were of a kind of native Baroque, the work of the local prodigy discovered in one of the neighbouring villages in the 18th Century when the traditional style of iconography had all but vanished. However, like the chapel of Sihastria, the paintings contained their own inner authority, Rubenesque flourishes of gesture and drapery combined with the familiar sombre cloudscape that meant you were somewhere near Russia. Angels and cherubims enveloped in heavenly mists merged into the half-light of the ceilings and cornices, great-bearded biblical personages stood in the flickering candlelight of their static kingdoms, looking down onto the massed rows of the nuns' black robes – luminous against banks of radiant candles. I could feel myself surge inwardly on the tide of collective surrender in which all doubts of the efficacy of devotion dissolved in an instant of understanding. This is the practice, the heart-to-heart connection with the divine that cuts through the thinking mind. A bell ringing in the open sky.

As I stepped out into the daylight again, I felt a sudden drop in my chest. A healing balm of love swept through me and a great weight fell from my heart into my stomach. It was as though all the tears I had never shed had, in an instant, been taken away. It was all I could do to sit down against the side of the Church to catch my breath. I didn't have words to explain what had happened, but the experience had shaken me. If I had been hoping for some kind of sign, this was it. Whatever way I looked at it, I couldn't escape from the reality of what had happened.

To continue on our route to the north we needed to negotiate the last foothills of the Carpathians. The instructions we had received went wrong almost immediately. Eventually we found the way, forging through overgrown firs and beeches dripping with water from an earlier downpour. When we reached the top of the pass, although it had stopped raining, we were drenched. From this high point from we could see Ceahlu mountain in the far distance behind us, the Carpathians continuing to our left, and before us, our first sight of the Moldavian plains. There was a vastness to the panorama stretched out before us that was quite unfamiliar; arteries of riverbeds fingering their course through the plateau, islands of settlements extending into one another, the evening sunlight reflected off Church domes and steeples, hungry cattle foraging the wasteland in the near distance. A prone land, with its infinitely complex web of human relationships that holds us all together, so vital to our survival and yet so vulnerable.

Exhilarated that we were close to our goal (a cluster of monastic looking buildings glimpsed from the hilltop) we almost ran down the mountain only to discover that instead of continuing north, we had inadvertently taken a parallel path due south. Realising our error too late, we came upon an old farm house at the end of the *drum forestier* (forest track) where we were able to ask for directions. We were adamant against suggestions that we retrace our steps back to our starting point, so we marched resolutely back up the road where we met a slightly more competent-looking forester who confirmed our intuition, advising us to continue back up the mountain where we would be able to pick up the correct route.

The walk back up the hill was necessarily slower than our descent, and with the gentling fragrance of evening, we began to talk about our experiences at Agapia. Paul had found the devotion of the nuns and the obvious surrender to the life both inspiring and terrifying. It was clear that the path of devotion

could be an effective way to go beyond the ego in the same way as a Zen koan⁵ acts as a means of stopping thought, turning the mind out of its habitual patterns. The illogical nature of belief prises free the believer's attachment to the neurotic self's control.

I recalled my experience outside the Agapia church. What I had experienced I understood to be the love of Christ in the most tangible form possible, and yet it was also what I knew to be letting go. Was it fundamentally different from what I was already doing as a Buddhist? Was it true after all that redemption only lay through Christ? The Orthodox insistence that as a European, born of Christian soil, I could never follow an Eastern path preys on the mind. Ironically, as a Buddhist, I have nothing to counter it with. I know that the moment I take a position I lose the only ground I have: that of not grasping to any fixed view. And yet, if they are right, then everything that has happened to me on this walk is turned on its head.

It suddenly seems as though I'm reading from the pages of the wrong script. I am a Buddhist monk for goodness' sake. I would never have come here if I had for a moment thought that I was not well grounded in my own faith. And yet everything I have been doing as a Buddhist, in the face of the actual experience of love, suddenly seems up for grabs. It is strange to observe how easily long-cherished notions of loyalty to the community, ideas of duty, that have for so long been a source of stability for me have simply ceased to be important. It's not that those feelings are not still there, but they are insignificant when it comes to the essential question of the heart's release.

As I talked about this with Paul I tried to formulate a way that the Buddha's way could be neatly dovetailed with a relationship with Christ. But the words turn to dust in my mouth as I hear myself mouth platitudes of a painless ecumenicalism, conveniently removing the possibility of sacrifice. Beneath the fear I had felt before of being overwhelmed by the Christian faith, I now recognise a deeper longing to be lost in it. A part of me thrills to the idea of being 'discovered' by Christ. To be so possessed that the walls of resistance are slowly but surely broken down and surrender and union arrived at.

But there are other levels which I can't ignore either. I have learnt enough to know that revelations are only a prelude to the longer, harder, more mundane practice of self-emptying that is the spiritual life in whatever tradition and has constituted my Buddhist practice all these years. That the desire for consummation with the beloved is real enough, but to grasp at it, to yearn for the complexities of ego to be obliterated in one go, is just another kind of self-annihilation. I know that, as a Buddhist, I've burnt my bridges. This is the way I must proceed. That the path I have taken inevitably leads beyond religious conventions, but this is something that demands honesty, sincerity and ultimately complete renunciation. This is the real challenge. Something, inevitably, I feel I fall short of.

When I am not attentive my mind makes mountains of all this. But when I can be still, or when the crushing physical hardship of the walk takes over again, all of these doubts seem to dissolve.

Friday, 15th – Paiseni Monastery

Writing in the morning in the guest apartment of the convent of Paiseni. There is a narrow balcony outside where I can meditate. Beyond, a view onto the thick forest. The town of Malini in the distance to the left. All these monasteries we have recently visited - Slatiora, Risca and Paiseni - seem to be composed of monks and nuns local to this region. They are a good deal humbler than the first ones we came to in the Agapia triangle. The churches smaller, the compounds more like farmyards, although here there is a lot of building going on. Thirty-seven nuns in a small cluster of buildings. Most of them young. Last night the mother *starets* stared at me dumbfounded in the twilight as I chatted in French to some of the guests.

In the morning we poked our noses into the church to join the mass. But we quickly retired from the nervous giggling of the nuns hovering around the vestibule⁶ and went to collect my sandals. The evening before they had been ripped coming down from the footpath from Slatiora yesterday. I had

asked if there was anywhere where I could dry them out before re-glueing them in the morning. I find the nun has actually repaired and cleaned them already. Just one of the countless small acts of kindness we have received from one monastery to another. Yesterday for instance we were hanging around Slatiora monastery trying to get an angle on the place, monks passing us by quietly going about their business; reading in the church, working with the animals, coming and going from the kitchen with food. Nobody seemed to be particularly interested in us and, not being bold enough to approach anyone directly, we rested on the steps of the *biserica* beneath the newly-painted frescoes of souls getting swallowed up by a black dragon. Suddenly a stocky-looking monk pulls us in for *mancare* (food), no questions asked, and in half an hour we are on the road again.

Meditating on the balcony, I focus on the heart. A *nimitta*⁷ of Christ appears. I open my mind to encompass the whole body - there is Buddha. The two principals of wisdom and love, forgiveness and the penetration of insight. Distinct and yet separate, unified in a flash of understanding. A re-cognition of what has always been known. The koan is broken.

It seems immature to dwell on any kind of exciting conversion experience, when all one has to do is to watch one in-breath and one out-breath. To be able to contemplate this experience as a whole, is more important than to try to grab at a fantasy of some kind of inner consuming of love that one supposes is the *bhakti*⁸ path. Is it not enough to enjoy what is positive and worthwhile in this monastic tradition rather than try to claim it as some kind of personal quest? The joy of humility always evokes a sense of sickness at one's own conceit.

17th July – Solca

Arrive in Solca after an easy morning's walk, making our own lunch for a change in the forest at the edge of town, a cafe bar a hundred metres away behind the tall pines. A wooded grove for the town's people to saunter in. On

a hot day like today the restful atmosphere draws us into its pine-scented shade. Romanian folk musak and American pop echo through the trees. A bench of tramps, like tramps anywhere, while the day away. Boys play at the foot of the trees. Sheep slumber under broken benches. It is Sunday. We have one week of our walking left to complete, and we are feeling as well and fit as we have ever done. Beware!

We started out to Voronet early in the morning. As the afternoon proceeded the sky cleared and the heat is on. Trudging for hours across a vast flat no-man's land, uncultivated save for a few fields of corn banked by dikes. Flocks of sheep and herds of cattle are scattered across the plain tended by young boys. We keep a watchful eye out for the ever-present menace of sheep dogs. Wagon caravans pulling carts of wood meander down the tracks towards Malini from where we have come. We are soaked with sweat and cool our limbs in the rushing river. A fat man tries to net fish with a ridiculous looking contraption that attempts to be a fishing rod and a net at the same time. Others walk in pairs, fording the river while holding the nets between them as they make a slow horizontal drag across. As the sun began to fall behind the mountains at the end of the valley, the folds of the receding mountains merge in the soft evening light.

We arrived at Voronet early the next morning and at first it seemed difficult to make contact. It was very much a tourist attraction, and rightly so seeing the exceptional beauty of the frescoes on the outer walls, almost perfectly preserved on the north and eastern side. There was a community of nuns, although their accommodation was outside the compound. I attended a few minutes of the morning service, savouring the sense of sacredness, the stillness, the beauty of the nuns' singing, the dim light revealing encrustations of illuminated screens, carved scrolled chairs, a suspended chandelier burning candles. But I preferred to hear the lyric tones filter out into the morning air as the first few pilgrims of the day began to trickle in.

We were on the verge of leaving when one of the nuns presented us with a package of bread and tomatoes, inviting us to the house where we were

told we could have something to eat. I presumed that the nun we had introduced ourselves to on our arrival had passed some message to the monastery about us. I must have conveyed to her something about me being a monk from India (much the easiest way to get past the difficulty of trying to explain what Buddhism is!) We were taken to a public table in the threshold of the nuns' quarters, joining a little old tramp lady who asked us for money. Some fried eggs and bread appeared for both ourselves and the old lady. Before we had finished, a rather nervous looking mother *starets* appeared. I gave her my blurb on the walk, in Romanian. For some reason I had decided not to show her the usual imprimatur of the Metropolitan. She left us to take a closer look at my text, returning a few moments later in a high flush. She demanded to know who had written it. I told her. "Why no stamp?" she replied in French, emphasising the point by stamping her fist onto the open paper as though our existence as human beings didn't really count unless we had some kind of government approval. We were told to leave as soon as we had finished our meal. I probably could have smoothed things over by producing the right papers, but I was too shaken. I could also see that she was a pitiful sight, full of fear and anger and suspicion. It was better to drop it. As we made our way to go, another of the younger nuns nervously hurried out to offer us handfuls of souvenirs that they had been selling at the monastery shop. It was impossible to tell whether they were to send us packing, or as a gesture of consolation.

We walked back down past the church and out of the monastery gates. The monastery guide, an effervescent middle-aged woman, fixed up a lift for us in a rusty old tour bus from Brasov. Just as we were making ready to get onto the bus, another nun came running after us with a little bundle of gifts, this time more bread and two packs of frozen butter. A third spontaneous and unexplained offering containing a host of implications. I came away quite baffled - my pride in tatters but the heart gladdened.

Proceeding to Monasteria Humorului (after Voronet, the second most famous of the painted monasteries of Bukovina) we followed the river path that ran parallel with the road. We noticed that behind us there were two

women who had been keeping the same pace as us for some time. Eventually they cut away from the road and headed in our direction. They were evidently foreigners, but we were astounded when we discovered that they were in fact English. Their casual air conveyed the sense that there was nothing in the least strange about meeting fellow country-men in such an unlikely setting, and they certainly made no mention of my curious garb. It made me want to scream out "Do you realise what I am!", but I restrained myself. Instead they told us about their recent misfortunes.

Earlier in the day they had had their bags stolen, but that was only the beginning of it. Tales of corruption in the work place. Constant sexual harassment, the brutalisation of the minorities. The more outgoing of the two, who was no pushover, was an advisory Health Administrator who had come to Romania as part of a VSO initiative to help modernise the Suceava region's health system. Within two weeks her relationship with her Romanian co-workers, mainly caused by the lecherous advances of the male managers she was supposed to be instructing, had deteriorated to such an extent that she was close to breaking point. Unsurprisingly her assessment of Romania was extremely critical. Any attempt on our part to put a more positive slant on things were cynically dismissed. They had written off the entire system. It was easy to do - but who were we to argue? They were experienced. Even though we had been in the country for nearly a month, our contact with the people had been fleeting. It made me realise how little I really knew about the working of the state machinery, its transition from Communism, the economy and its politics. What really lay behind the exterior? The impoverishment of the peasants, the subservient role of the women, the growing crime rate - these stories which we all expect to hear in the West were in direct contrast to what we had encountered; the dignity of the peasants, the strength of the women, the close-knit communities and the sense of safety we had experienced in the streets. Were things really any better in the West? Although we happily imbibed these outpouring of the mother tongue, bored as we were with each others conversation, we weren't able to share with them our experiences of the beauty

of this land, the kindness we had received and the spirituality that lay hidden and secret in the hills around Agapia.

Letter to Radmilla and John Hermmann

Ionaseni 24th July

Now we have arrived, a great tiredness overcomes me. Now that there are no more sweat-filled days and aching feet, the mind no longer on the edge of survival - I sleep in the morning after breakfast at 9 am (I still manage to wake up before 6 am such is the nature of my inner alarm) I sleep in the afternoon, and by evening time I am yawning at 9 pm (Although it's usually difficult to get to bed much before 10 pm as I have to negotiate the family and friends who like nothing better than to sit around in the cool of the evening and chat.) We are staying with Mama Poi, an indomitable grandmother who quite definitely rules the roost. She has become a surrogate mother for all the volunteers who usually lodge with local families. But most particularly my brothers who lived here on and off over a period of three years as well as my mother who stayed here when she came to visit. If it had got out that I had gone anywhere else other than Mama Poi's, she would have been mortally offended.

Paul is also in a state of semi-permanent fatigue and has been enjoying this opportunity to take more of a back seat. I think his greatest suffering on this walk has been lack of privacy. But despite his lack of experience of hiking, he has shown incredible stamina. What has kept him going more than anything I think, in the absence of physical reserves to draw on, is his willingness to surrender to his own despair and continue on regardless. A rare quality I have grown to respect and something that has drawn us closer than I would have imagined possible at the outset.

Mama Poi's seems to be the gathering place for various activities that we plan with the SEA volunteers who we have got to know. As could be expected, everyone is run off their feet. Stress is just the way of life - cigarettes being the No. 1 therapy cure. However, after a few days one begins to see the logic behind it. Everyone has their own distinct role. All the volunteers here are either funding themselves for the first three

months or on the local wage rate. In other words they are totally self-motivated, which is tremendously inspiring to be around.

Most of them speak excellent Romanian (compared to us!) and have cultivated an impressive network of friendships among the locals around Ionaseni and Botosani. The contrast of course between the speedy volunteers and the Romanians, who are just getting on with the daily round in what seems to be a delightfully measured way, is vivid. I find myself inclining more towards the rhythm of the locals. It has an almost monastic monotony to it, born of generations of survival through long winters, hard regimes and the periodical incursions of advancing or retreating armies. To survive is a feat in itself. The volunteers on the other hand are on the other extreme ranging from idealistic university graduates, trained professionals looking for some adventure, to anarchist punks who are a delightful curiosity for the locals and in some ways fit in best. They want to change the world and consequently ignore the inner chaos of their own lives and minds. Perhaps there is a Middle Way here!

Well, so caught up have I been in these ponderous reflections that I have managed to avoid the highlight of the visit and the climax of the walk. It is strange how evanescent it is, now it has passed, and no matter how much one tries to recreate the details in one's mind, it remains what it was in actuality: a passing illusion. A chimera. Like all our experiences in fact, but perhaps because it was such an emotionally charged moment, and for me a great joy, it's dream-like quality was its most characteristic feature.

We had walked the last stretch to the orphanage from a little village about five miles away. The few companions we had set out with soon grew to a procession of orphans, volunteers, kids from the local villages and, tracking our every move, the ubiquitous camera team from Iasi T.V. I soon lost sense of what was going on, save for the people directly beside me and in front as the procession rounded the last corner before the orphanage. The crowd (by now a ragbag procession of about twenty or thirty orphans and volunteers) seemed to fan out behind me, and Paul and I were thrust to the front. A couple of orphans, I don't know whether they were pushed forward or they simply sensed the significance of the moment, moved to take hold of our hands. We passed through the gates noticing out of the corner of my eye the local VIP's standing on the balcony above the front entrance as though they were members of the Politburo. As we swung around the back of

the pink and white building, a band of blind musicians began to play. The orphans danced like mutilated puppets, gleefully throwing their limbs about, the less inhibited of the volunteers dancing along with them.

A crowd started to gather around me as though they were expecting something important to happen. I remembered the icon I had carried from Mount Athos for the orphans. The local Orthodox Priest appeared on cue as I dug into my rucksack beneath the curious gaze of the onlookers. I unfolded the icon from its cloth cover and made my presentation amidst much cheering and jubilation. The priest, a small chubby man in his forties, wrapped me in his arms kissing me on either cheek. It was the most moving moment of the trip, as though in that final action all the different strands of the walk had come together, and the journey was complete.

Everything after that, if I lose perspective, inevitably seems like an anti-climax. There has been a kind of inner dying as one resumes the postures of the daily round. It comes as a shock to realise that for the last four months I have been living in many respects on the edge. Ordinary living by comparison suddenly seems rather - well - ordinary.

I know there are many lessons I have yet to unravel from the experience which will no doubt remain with me for many years to come. When I look back on the whole of it, it is not so much with an eye for the glorious peak moments, like the one I have just attempted to describe, but to see how I was able to work through the difficult times. For me this is what makes the experience so valuable, that I had the time to see obstacles arising, to perhaps be knocked down by them, and to be able to pick myself up and continue. It is this quality of sustaining that is the secret, something that has only come from the previous years of living the ups and downs of monastic life. Seeing how supportive this practice has been on the road, in the raw reality of life as it is, brings great faith in the validity of my training as a monk. Of course I have seen, and done many things that in retrospect I would have done differently. But if I had not made any mistakes, if I had been perfect, what point would there be in me returning to monastic life?

With blessings in Dhamma.

Venerable Sobhano

Notes and References

- 1 I had received an introduction to Dr. Daniel Ciobotea, the newly ordained Metropolitan of Moldavia and Bukovina, from Father Donald Allchin. A Fax with the imprimatur of the Metropolitan proved to be enough to open all but the most rigid of doors in the Orthodox establishments of Romania.
- 2 *Sammasati - An Exposition of Right Mindfulness* by Phra Debvedi, Buddha-dhamma Foundation.
- 3 The movement of what is known in Theravada Buddhism as the Forest Tradition, in Thailand owes its revival earlier this century to Ajahn Mun. A generation of meditation masters emerged from his tutelage, many of whom have also left behind practice communities. One of these, Ajahn Chah, taught some of the first Westerners to come to the north-east of Thailand. They were subsequently invited to England where there are now four monasteries. Thomas Merton had written in his *Asian Journals* that he had been told of the meditation masters of the Forest Tradition and was planning to visit them before his fatal accident.
- 4 Starets: Russian term meaning 'elder' or 'old man'. The elder is a monk of spiritual discernment and wisdom whom others - either monks or lay people - adopt as their guide and spiritual director. Not necessarily the Abbot however it is commonly used as a term to refer to the most senior monk or nun in the monasteries who in many cases would fulfil both roles.
- 5 Koan: A technical term in Rinzai Zen Buddhism. A word or phrase of non-sensical language which cannot be 'solved' by the intellect but which holds its attention while a higher faculty takes over. Used as an exercise for breaking the limitations of thought and developing the intuition thereby obtaining a flash of awareness beyond duality. (Christmas Humphreys: *A Popular Dictionary of Buddhism*)
- 6 Much to our embarrassment we later learnt that menstruating women are forbidden from entering the central hall of an Orthodox church. During services they can only participate from the entrance way which, on this occasion, we had hoped would offer us a more discreet vantage point!
- 7 Nimitta: Pali word commonly used in the Thai forest tradition. An appearance that may take place in terms of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching or a mental impression, and which arises based on the *Citta* (heart /mind) and not upon the relevant sense organ. Examples of *Nimittas* are: the

seeing or hearing of ghosts, precognition, clairvoyance, etc. (Ajahn Maha Boowa: *Kammathana - the basis of practice*).

- 8 Bhakti: Attitude of loving adoration towards God in Hinduism. Is also used in some phases of Indian Buddhism. (Brandon: *A Dictionary of Comparative Religion*).

Watercolour on Watercolour (for Owen Merton 1887-1931)

by
David Scott

Trusting the sliding wet
and mixing it with coloured earth,
you made the fire and air
of Southern France and Africa.

Which left you just
the bits of paper on your bed
in London, on which you drew
the faces of the saints.

The river of San Antonin
drove through your studio
destroying all you owned.
The authorities chucked away
the sodden, curling books.

Leaving the glass of water
a long, dark night away,
you took a pencil and practiced
for the end, for light on light.

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