

Two Mountains never meet Venerable Sobhano

In the monastic world, Mount Athos stands alone as an example of an entire society whose sole function is to support a celibate culture of prayer and devotion. A living museum of monasticism, a place of real spiritual power, no other tradition has gone to such lengths to protect its monastic heritage. While there are many obvious and irreconcilable differences between Buddhism and Christianity, there are also remarkable parallels between their contemplative traditions. Unlike some other schools within Buddhism and Christianity, the Theravada (to which I belong) and the Orthodox monastic orders in particular have a special place at the apex and centre of their respective faith communities, around which the faith of the people revolves. The outward uniformity of their ancient monastic discipline has been able to embrace a variety of approaches, whose unbroken lineage provides a direct link with an experiential and mystic form of meditation and prayer that lie at the heart of both traditions. Were these mere flights of fancy, or was it possible that a communion could be found between the two traditions on the inviolable peninsula of the Holy Mountain.

Such thoughts as these that had propelled me towards the mirage of inter-monastic fraternity were very far from my mind that spring morning in April when I stepped off the boat at the port of Daphne, Mount Athos - the first stage of a four month pilgrimage across the Balkans that would take me through Macedonia and Serbia to an orphanage in the Northeast of Romania.

The journey had begun earlier that morning. With my travelling companion Paul, we had set off by bus from Thessaloniki at 5.30 am, destined for the port of Ouranoupolis from where we would embark on the ferry for Athos. Monks in black robes had already begun to congregate in silent groups when we arrived at the bus station. Nobody paid us any attention, most of them concentrating on their black woollen rosaries which they used for the recitation of the Jesus Prayer.

We nodded off as we left the city, snaking our way over the low hills towards the coast. The land was fresh and green in the dawn light, almost biblical. The monks swayed in rhythm to the movements of the bus, silently regarding the horizon as the local villagers, by contrast, chatted merrily away. When we reached the port, we joined a queue of pilgrims who were patiently standing under a wattle-roofed shelter where we would be given our *Diamitrons*, the passes that would finally avouch us entry into the hallowed land that spread out on the peninsula behind us.

I shivered in the cold wind as I stood waiting by a seated row of plain clothes policemen and a civil servant who was stamping the *Diamitrons*. None of

them acknowledged my presence, averting their eyes and whispering amongst themselves. As the line of pilgrims diminished I drew closer to the tables. Paul went first pushing forward our passports. The officer in charge was looking sour. He asked us where we were from, checking our statements against the forms. All his questions were directed to Paul, he was playing for time. There was more huddled discussion. The plain clothes policeman regarded me as though I was already condemned. I felt like throwing up. Just tell us to go away, I screamed inside, or put us up against a wall, but just get on with it. A small bright eyed monk who had been observing the proceedings went to make a phone call to Karyes, the capital of Mount Athos. He returned a few minutes later saying that the Holy Fathers, the ruling council of Abbots, had approved me. The officer rased his stamp over my *Diamitron*. He couldn't do it. He winced. Shaking his head he brought the stamp down with an ugly thud. It was more than his job was worth.

The crowd of Pilgrims was now threading its way towards the jetty where the ferry was waiting. The captain, standing on the gangway blocked my path. He shouted in Greek at the people next to me. One of the men told him they had rung HQ. He shook his head and waved me on. On the boat most of the monks were inside, warming themselves downstairs, while the workers and pilgrims were in the bar. I spoke to one of the monks who had some broken English. I wanted to shrivel up and hide in the corner. I was still tired from the bus journey. Paul went to buy some toasted cheese sandwiches and a coffee. The monk I had talked to introduced me to another monk who he said spoke better English. We sat together on the bench facing the sea, sipping coffee.

His name was Father Nikon, "just like the camera", he laughed. "I used to be a film director". If they were going to lynch me it wasn't going to happen now. After a while I left to get some photographs I had with me to show my new monk friend. When I returned, the first monk I had spoken to was speaking with Father Nikon. We looked through my photographs. Father Nikon had an otherworldly quality to him, as though at any moment his cowl would perspire butterflies. He was tall and thin with long slender fingers and an elegant refined face. His expression varied from a wistful smile to a reposed calm. He said that Mount Athos was a quiet place, the pilgrims came carrying all the burdens of their lives and left elated. One could imagine him as a film director, but he was better as a monk. "Your robes", he said melancholically, "the old monks, they are not like us, they are not of this world. It will disturb their peace." What sort of peace is it, I thought, that can be so easily disturbed. "But my rule ..." by this time my resistance was weakening as I flashed back through all the difficulties we had encountered in getting approval to visit. "I know this is difficult for you," Father Nikon said again, almost with love, "but we are monks in our hearts". My resistance melted. "When we get to Daphne, (the main port of Mount Athos) I will find somewhere to change out of your robes." Somehow I felt relieved.

There was a great bustle of activity as the passengers from the ferry filled the little square of the port of Daphne, merging with the oncoming crowd of monks waiting to board. There wasn't much time for anyone to notice my flying saffron robes, blown by the sea breeze, as we scuttled towards some steps by the tourist ships. Some stocky older monks with bushy white beards pointed at me. A craggy old policeman, wearing an evil looking iron eagle on his beret pulled at my robe as I squatted down finding some solace in a Pepsi Paul had just given me. "You see it's already started," Father Nikon said in his wistful way as he left us to find a place for me to change my disguise.

He returned shortly and took me to what seemed like some sort of guest house. Inside there was nobody about but everything was perfectly clean and ordered as though they were expecting someone. Simple wooden tables polished brightly and the bare plaster walls adorned with the occasional icon. I was shown to an empty room just off the first floor landing. I took off my outer robes and untied the waist strap around my lower *sabong*. I swept aside any lingering doubts about what I was doing as I was quite clear now about my intention. Paul's trousers were a little on the short side, but they felt surprisingly familiar considering I had been in skirts for almost ten years. I folded the robes and re-packed my rucksack, emerging from my changing room as just another pilgrim.

We had to decide quickly where we should go as the next boat taking passengers along the West coast of the peninsula was to leave shortly. I had a handful of tentative connections, all of them equally vague, so I opted for the 14th century Monastery of Gregoriou one stop down the coast line, where we had been told there was a respected Abbot. (We later found out that he was away). Built over the rocky shore, the edifice of Gregoriou was relatively humble in comparison to the towering glory of Simona Petra an hours steep climb away, but it was a roof over the head for one night so we weren't complaining.

Wednesday 13th. Mount Athos

We are here. I am writing this leaning against a stone on a beach between Grigoriou and Simona Petra monastery. It is already 4 pm so we are too late to make the ascent.

I am in Paul's trousers. My robes left lying in our room.

Our journey began at 5 am this morning leaving Thessaloniki on a bus at 6. We arrived at Ouronupolis and went through a grilling at the check point. It seemed certain that we would not go. Then a monk, Pater Forte, telephoned HQ. We were given clearance but every step of the way we encountered suspicion. Even the captain of the boat stopped us. On the boat I started talking with a monk who spoke English, Father Nikon. He seemed very sympathetic. I went to get some photographs and another monk came to tell

him that I must not wear my robes. He put it to me gently, almost with love. The old fathers, he said, would be frightened of such things.

Thursday 14th. Monastery Gregoriou 10 am

A rude awakening. Trying to keep my heart open in an atmosphere of extreme distrust. The non-Christian teachings of transcendent self-realisation are diabolical in the eyes of the Orthodox faith. Now, without my robes, I spend every waking hour in the monastery with a background fear of persecution. Not that they would actually do anything violent, but it certainly isn't conducive to peace of mind.

Last night two young monks talked with me on the balcony as the sun turned golden over the calm sea. The crescent moon and star in a clear sky. They were gentle and kind. I attempted to be honest and open with them. However such well meaning approaches were cut down at every turn.

First: The Orthodox faith believes in an intensely personal God. The belief in the reality of the person, created by God, is absolute. The Eastern teachings imply a refutation of this and by implication evil.

Second: The Orthodox faith is on the defensive. Their history of persecution by the Turks and the Catholics has been deeply etched into their beliefs. Their distrust of other faiths seem to stem partly from this.

Third: Psychological theory, intellectualisation of the teaching is deeply mistrusted. The experience of the love of God is something that cuts through such self-motivated principles. Through baptism and communion, the relationship with God through Christ is directly witnessed to.

Fourth: Prayer. This was something they did not go into much, but it was stated that prayer is absolutely *not* meditation - or a mantra - I'm not quite sure how it is different, perhaps something to do with the way the divine works through you.

Fifth: The monk's life. The monk is not simply working for himself, but for all beings, dead and to be born. This of course includes non-Christians. The monk is praying not for himself, but through the prayer is able to nourish the world.

Sixth: The body, similarly with the first point, is to be revered as the creation of God. I don't quite understand how this is translated in spiritual practice. However the point is that the body is God given, and will be created in heaven, by God, and given its true name.

We spent much time discussing, or at least me trying to explain the Buddhist

teachings - all the time sensing, (especially now having glanced through a text by Father Sophrany from the monastery in Essex,) that I was giving them perfect cannon fodder. They turn every statement into a problem, a dogma. Even the statement that we have no dogma again gets twisted, and thrown back at you. That dogma is something the Christian monk strives, and perhaps may fail, to believe in.

Reflecting afterwards, it is clear that I need to make explicit my desire to learn about the Orthodox rather than appear to be clinging to the Buddhist practice. Now it must be close to breakfast and my stomach is beginning to yearn for replenishment. Paul is at a service which I chose to miss.

This is definitely a time of misery for me. As far as practice is concerned it is helpful only in so far as it gives me an opportunity to see how my own practice holds up without the supports. But taking away the robe is fundamental, and in this environment where one is ideologically under attack - I wonder whether I am strong enough to take it.

Father Nikon's House. Nea Skiti. Evening time.

We must talk of the beauty of this place. Breathtaking views from the high points above the ocean. Ancient monasteries perched on the rocks. Small settlements appearing here and there in the mountain clefts. Ruby red church roofs.

The vegetation around Nea Skiti proliferates especially well. Oranges and lemons abound, vines climb on every balustrade. Olive trees, grey leaves and hand made slates merge. Around the mountain tracks chains of donkeys clamber up and down the hills. The setting sun behind the hills of the peninsula opposite send red streaks over the clear night sky. Now the sound of frogs from one of the water tanks in the skete that does not possess goldfish, drifts into the night.¹

Set against this beauty is the rigid intolerance of other religions as made manifest in their writings on non-orthodox faiths. Arriving at Father Nikon's, we were greeted warmly. "It is good that you have come," he says. It is like being back in the fold. Friendly and relaxed. We chat harmlessly in Father Nikon's studio with an American novice from St. Paul's monastery over the hill. He is inspired by the prospect of us going to a Romanian orphanage and tells us he will prepare an icon for us to take to the children. A wonderful idea as far as I am concerned. We will see.

However the mood darkens within as I read a recommended text by a certain Father Seraphim Rose who explains how the various forms of a non-Christian, in fact just non-Orthodox, teachings are corrupting the world. He offers us a golden age of Orthodoxy, having seen away the heathens. It comes as another

bolt to the heart to read even a few lines. I manage to complete the chapter on Buddhism with various references to Buddhist communities in America including Shasta Abbey. He quotes William Johnson and Thomas Merton at length, vilifying them for their sympathies with the opposition. It is a puerile work, something to be expected from a third rate TV evangelist.

Father Nikon is a good hearted man, but there is a rigid silence over dinner to which we are invited to join. It is obviously painful for him not to be able to offer us food.² Paul points out that his hospitality is especially kind in that he is offering his home to the pagans. His instincts betray his information. We are the enemy.

A consoling moment on the ferry from Monastery Gregoriou. I recognise Father Theoliptus³ from the photographs in the BBC magazine article I had read before leaving England. I introduce myself and he says immediately, "Two mountains never meet." I wonder, perplexed, not quite sure whether he is using it as a metaphor for Christianity and Buddhism. He repeats the phrase and chuckles, "and now they have met!"

This stayed with me as we trudged up the hill heading for Agio Ann - Skete St. Anne. Almost a sheer climb. It is hot and dusty, mercifully protected from the sun by the shade of the olive trees and undergrowth. We wander off down the wrong track, creeping perilously close to the edge of the yawning space beneath us, the sea thousands of feet below. We reach a high cleft in the rocks where the ruins of an old cottage sit temptingly. Below more settlements. Much work is being done. In fact reconstruction work is being done all over. "A renaissance," says Stavros, the American novice from St. Paul's.

We meet two Americans travelling in the opposite direction who show us the way back towards the direction we should go going. We stagger back to St. Anne's. They are preparing coffee and Turkish delight mercifully allowable. Eventually we are directed to Nea Skete and to Father Nikon.

A moment of hilarity with Paul as we sit on the balcony beneath the stars. Mild hysteria at the dawning of our predicament. In the lion's den - and still two days to go. I feel naive to say the least. I hope that there is some ultimate reason for this madness. It's too late to turn back. The only thing to do is to take it one moment at a time. Not to think about it. I am lent a book - "A Night in the Desert of the Holy Mountain" by Archimandrite Hierotheos Vlahos. "A discussion with a hermit on the Jesus prayer" - which looks promising.

Morning of the 16th. Megisti Lavra

Megisti Lavra is one of the oldest monasteries on the Athos, founded in 963 AD. Facing east, it is at the bottom of the mountain with the sea about two

hundred feet down a gentle slope below. It is surrounded by castellated towers, within its boundaries a whole medieval warren of churches, buildings for guests, (large modern quarters), monks' accommodation, a huge *trapezary* (refectory). Cobbled walkways and huge ancient yew trees. It is crumbling and there are few signs of imminent repair, despite the heaps of building materials everywhere.

We arrived with a group of about 20, mainly Greek, pilgrims and a camera crew from the Daily Telegraph. The pilgrims come from all backgrounds and are hustled from one service to another. This morning at 1 a.m. some extraordinary bells were sounded to call the faithful to a '*Kaliko*', a special service for the Virgin Mary. This is Lent so everyone is very keen. Neither of us felt faithful enough to attend. They were still going at it when I popped round at 6 am. The monks seem more aloof and unfriendly here than at any other place we have been so far.

The memory of our last morning helps balance the overall bleak picture of a closed community. Father Nikon was in good spirits when we left, turning into the director, doing take after take with his camera, of me in my robes, as a record for posterity. We bade our farewells heading for St. Paul's where we met the Novice, Stavros. He was waiting sheepishly with his icon, a triptych, three wooden boards with icons varnished onto the surface with messages in English, Greek and Romanian written on the back. "To the children of Romania" and at the bottom the Lord's prayer in Greek. Its going to add a kilo to my pack, but it's worth it.

After the service finished, a meal was served in the *trapezary*. For the first time we were able to join with the whole group. The *trapezary* walls were covered with the most frescoes we had seen so far, under the nauseous glare of a fluorescent blue light intended, we presumed, as an insect repellent. The meal was already laid out. A long line of circular tables, hewn out of solid marble ran along either side of the hall. Around the tables were circular marble benches. The atmosphere was stark. At the sound of a bell everyone started to eat at a fiendish pace as a monk at the lectern droned on. Cold squid and taramasalata, not the most appetising of dishes at seven in the morning but it was food. After ten minutes the bell rang and the pilgrims shuffled out from their benches standing to attention to form a corridor down which the Abbot and his standard bearers processed out the great wooden portals.

By now a subterranean dread of persecution oppressed my perceptions. The historical charm of the medieval setting was turning into a nightmare throwback of the Dark Ages; the joyless solemnity of the monks: the dark-eyed suspicion: the fear of the Devil, (which we were understood to be emissaries of): the dark ritual: the gruesome hellfire frescoes depicting damnation of the unbelievers. It was to know that primal instinct for self-

preservation that, in the face of the blinding scorn of prejudice, interprets every gesture as a sign of hostility.

By the time we heard about a ride going to Karyes, we were already planning our escape. A snub-nosed Mercedes truck was parked by the entrance way and a throng of middle-aged pilgrims were clambering up the sides. It was every man for himself as we fought for hand holds as the monk driver hurtled down the rough track for an interminable, bone-rattling hour.

The small settlement of Haryes on that overcast day offered us some hope that the twentieth century, for all its faults, was not far away. We found a bleak looking cafe where we gorged on three packets of biscuits and cups of coffee in an attempt to obliterate the swill of slimy squid from the morning repast. I found a card phone, (oh blessed technology!), and rang back to Thessaloniki. Some Buddhists we had met there were building a Three Year Retreat Centre in the Mountains of Halkidiki which we had arranged to visit on our way back. They said they could pick us up in a town north of Ouranoupolis. "I'm not wearing my robes", I shouted down the crackling lines. "Great" came the answer, "keep them off until we reach you - we don't want you to be recognised!"

On the boat to Ouranoupolis.

Monastic Hospitality. The tradition of monastic hospitality is a very good reflection for us. In some ways it makes their life a lot simpler. By simply serving visitors they avoid the whole business of teaching people how to do things. They prepare the meals, lay the tables, wash the linen. The pilgrims are allowed to pay their respects and continue. The focus is not on the monks per se, but on the worship. On the icons. On the figure of Christ. The monks serve the visitors as if they were Christ. At least this is the ideal. There is also a delineation that makes it difficult to enter into the monks' lives. By diverting the attention of the pilgrims to the cross, they have their privacy.

Megisti Lavra was intimidating more than it was hospitable. The gestures of hospitality towards the pilgrims were cursory and they were treated like cattle. They went along with it good-humouredly enough as their focus is clearly on accumulating shrines. From what we could see, there were few opportunities for the significance of the teachings to be communicated to the laity. This is obviously not a role the monk is expected to play. The monk is there to serve Christ utterly. To die to him. Examples of the practice of humility were everywhere; in the deference to the elders and the training of the novices who, in some places, were almost, literally, walking corpses.

Monastic hospitality is an expression of the life, and to experience it sets up an atmosphere of trust that pilgrims will take back to their own lives. On Mount Athos, however, it is obvious that the height of the season demands too much

of the monks. Many of the pilgrims are not necessarily there for spiritual purposes. The museum of Mount Athos takes over.

For the non-Orthodox, the uninstructed, the rituals and traditions remain alien and uninviting. We are left without any idea about what is going on. On the one hand, this cuts through the superficial explanations and justifications. They are just getting on with it. On the other it is a missed opportunity. The pilgrims' glowing features display the benefit of their devotions. They are the believers and they have come to be re-inducted into the mainstream of their tradition. To experience it at its heart. For the non-believer it is better not to have come at all.

The experience of the Skete life gives a flavour of how life might have been during the days when the idiorhythmic⁴ life was the norm. The cenobitic life gives a solid training, but it also seems to breed an aggressive conformity that can so easily turn mystical truisms into dogmatism, becoming indistinguishable from Islamic fundamentalism. It is perhaps idealistic to imagine that thirty years ago it might have been possible for an ordained monk in Buddhist robes to visit without being harassed, but the live and let live attitude of the idiorhythmic monks, I feel, would naturally have allowed for more tolerance.

Ironically the outward rejection of my faith, and the removal of the psychological supports of practice only served to deepen that movement within towards the basic ground of truth that I could neither defend nor prove, but simply was. Was it not that same rejection that confirmed the faith of the founders of the early Church, born out of the fires of persecution? This was the faith that could move mountains. The faith that, as Merton describes in this extract from "A Christian looks at Zen", is purified for both the Christian and Buddhist, in the fearless facing of reality as it is.

"Both Buddhism and Christianity are alike in making use of ordinary everyday human existence as material for radical transformation of human consciousness. Since ordinary everyday human existence is full of confusion and suffering, then obviously one will make good use of these in order to transform one's awareness and one's understanding, and to go beyond both to attain "wisdom" in love. It would be a grave error to suppose that they merely offered various explanations of suffering, or worse, justifications and mystifications built on this ineluctable fact. On the contrary, both show that suffering remains inexplicable most of all for the man who attempts to explain it in order to evade it, or thinks explanation itself is an escape. Suffering is not a "problem" as if it were something we could stand outside and control. Suffering, as both Buddhism and Christianity see, each in its own way, is part of our very ego-identity and empirical existence, and the only thing to do about it is to plunge right into the middle of contradiction and confusion in

order to be transformed by what Zen calls the "Great Death" and Christianity calls "dying and rising with Christ."

Thomas Merton
"A Christian looks at Zen"

1. Father Nikon told us that the monks put goldfish in their tanks to eat the frog's spawn. This new monk hadn't known this, and what's more was deaf!
2. One of the renunciant precept of the Buddhist monk's rule is to refrain from eating solid food, with the exception of certain 'allowable' medicines, from midday to the following dawn.
3. I had written to Father Theoliptus in advance of my visit, to which he had written a friendly reply.
4. There are two styles of monastic life in the Orthodox tradition: idiorhythmic and cenobitic. The former lays stress on flexibility and individual responsibility and was famously preserved on Mount Athos. In the sixties a reform movement reintroduced the cenobitic lifestyle, all the monks conforming to the one rule, which now holds sway over all but one of the monasteries and the sketes.

