

**Rain on Marshal Tito Square
Ven. Sobhano**

*Have patience dear soul! Robes of magnificence
Cannot be worn by you, while in this wilderness.
Angelius Silesius*

This second extract from Venerable Sobhano's journey through the Balkans in the Spring and Summer of 1994 begins on his third day in Macedonia.

Monastery St. Michael, Prilep. April 22nd 1994

We arrived here last night, seeking shelter from the pouring rain after a day's walk from the Roman ruins of Stobi. The day before we had been cut down in the scorching heat with our first blisters, ending up in a poverty-stricken village looking for food. No school. Men and women working in the midday sun. Tilling the soil with simple tools. Horses and carts here are the norm. The flat plains of the Vardour valley support vines and vegetables but there is a constant threat of drought. Even the larger towns are run down, the only attempt at modernity being the Communist hotels which look exceedingly flaky when you get behind the drab concrete exteriors.

Prilep, from what we could tell, was the biggest town of the Southern region. The monastery is hidden behind an outcrop of volcanic rock towering above the sprawl of Prilep. At the top, the ruins of a Turkish fort. What remains of the once great monastery that extended in tiers down the mountain side, is perched off the side of a rock wall. It is in good condition however, being preserved more as a hostel than a monastery. We are informed by our travelling companion Marija (the only Buddhist that we know of in Macedonia, she has travelled from the capital Skopje to escort us for the first few days) that there are only three or four active monasteries in the whole of Macedonia, with about as many monks.

We spend a few hours with the caretaker Priest, a chain-smoking old war veteran in his sixties. With him is a sad young girl who has taken refuge under his wing; and in return she helps with the chores around the monastery. It seems at last as through the magic of Tudong¹ is beginning as we receive the benign concern of our hosts who seem to think nothing of us hanging up our wet clothes in their only private sitting room.

There is an innocence to these people and a gentleness which is a relief after the extrovert passion of the Greeks. They toot their horns as we walk along the roads, and the peasants always wave or shake our hands as we walk by. We sit in restaurants drinking much coffee, the only thing worth drinking.

My mind becomes clam walking in the rain.

Now I am tired.

Night of the 23rd. North of Prilep

We left the Monastery of St. Michael to catch the 1 o'clock train for the Monastery Slepce, 40 kilometres towards the mountains to the North that embrace the land in a great basin to the South. The Priest gave me an emotive hug as we left, hurling whole torrents of incomprehensible (but I presumed praiseworthy) utterances at me. We got a lift to the station arriving with ten minutes to spare. The "station" consisted of a house with a track next to it, and no sign of a platform. Hundreds of peasants clutched their provisions from the town. It was market day. Old ladies carrying all manner of bags, boxes and sacks of provisions. A grandmother, balancing elaborately tied sheets of polystyrene, waits in anticipation.

The train, a gigantic beast of a diesel rumbled in and the mad rush began. A young man with two great panes of glass, completely unprotected, blithely hoped onto the train. Our entrance was blocked by a bicycle half jammed into the toilet. We squirmed our way into the corridor, Marija cried, "it's just like India!", as though she was personally responsible for the shambles. I was forced into a seat that had been given up for me. The old women in my compartment were all thick and stocky with powerful hands and bright shining eyes. Those with teeth had beautiful smiles. The conductor came by and asked an old man for his ticket. He produced a bank note which the conductor sneered at and let him go.

The train journey was over in about 20 minutes. This time the station was a crumbling skeleton of a house in the middle of a forest. Cows wandering over the tracks as the train nuzzled them out of the way. Two women by the watering well in the village pointed us towards the monastery at the foot of the hill beyond. At first we thought we'd made a mistake, as it had all the appearance of a farm, which it was, save for a few fading frescoes over the great arched gateway at the entrance. There was further evidence that it had once been a monastery from the small church beside the sheep pen, and the typical three storey balconies on the main building within the crumbling walls.

Three old shepherds were running the place. The one in charge, a Serbian, had a slight hunched stoop and wore the same army cap he had worn in his partisan days. They all shook our hands with wet, freshly washed palms smelling of sheep's milk. They survived on constant activity. Wiry figures, full of strength, that would go on relentlessly till the day they died. We were given sheep's cheese and taken to see the 13th century murals inside the church.

Almost all the colour had gone but it seemed to give the exquisitely painted black and white frescoes more power. The colour of the icons on the main portico had

all but vanished, leaving traces of the original outlines and deep black visages merging with the pocked plaster beneath, as though the superficial ornamentation had been rubbed out leaving the ghost like essence of the saints behind. We planted three candles; one for health and one for God on a raised stand, and a third for the dead which was put into a bowl of sand on the floor. The Serbian shepherd burst into prayer and we stood solemnly for a few minutes. Our bedrooms were in almost as wrecked a state as the church, but we managed to assemble a semblance of sanctity around a makeshift Buddha shrine of flowers that Marija found with incense and an outrageous crystal that had been given to us by Yoros, a visionary folk singer we had met in Athens.

There is a constant play between the enthusiasm to forge ahead and the limitations that are pressing in from all directions. Whichever way one turns, Dukkha² impresses. Through heedlessness or desire we temporarily lose the refuge. But it comes as nectar, when we gather before the shrine and let the mind stop in emptiness. This is what makes Tudong so refreshing. The inner refuge is experienced more vividly when contrasted with the confusion of the world.

It's raining outside. A foreign land, lost somewhere in a pre-war state of semi-collapse. And yet the heart yearns just to be walking into that great unknown. There is an infallible trust that somehow things will work out.

We will be looked after. We will survive.

Monastery Metamorphosis, April 24th

Staying the night in another monastery, Sveti Metamorphosis, on the other side of the basin, a steep hours walk from the village below. The clouds were tumbling down over the mountains, intermittently raining. Later on rainbows came, arching over us into distance.

Walking across the plain we passed through several villages which all have the same rough peasant feel to them. They are more like a collection of extended farms with the standard appearance of semi-collapse, each one merging into the other to form a notional boundary that can only be loosely thought of as a village. Dogs and chickens dig around in the dirt and young boys hang around whatever happens to be designated the local shop. Villagers have a stock look of amazement when they see my saffron robes; this is usually followed by a nod, a wave or a smile. They never appear aggressive and often, if we have asked the way, they send one of the boys to show us.

Up here it is like a heavenly realm, above the filth and brutality of the plains. The cool mountain air, the cherry blossoms and the carefully maintained farm all show a level of competence and resourcefulness unseen down below. The monastery is looked after by a priest and an old nun, Sister Seraphim, from Bosnia. She has a shrivelled arm and a very strong character. The priest is mild-mannered but also kind in his cautious way.

We are shown around the monastery church, which has beautifully preserved 13th century frescoes on the outside walls. Inside they have aged less well. The expressions on some of the figures however are astonishingly true to life for this period of iconography. Marija tells us that Macedonia was in fact a storehouse for the iconographic techniques that later spread to the north, as well as being the birth place of the Cyrillic³ script that is found in all the Slav countries.

A feeling of nameless sorrow descends as we prepare for bed. A constant background companion. It has no cause, it is always there. The sea changes of the heart that quietly ache for our attention. The Tudong experience is a test for one's wisdom, for one's skill in letting go, in being able to use the restraint of the monastic discipline as a means to let go of control. The same familiar patterns, here as in the monastery, repeat themselves ad nauseam: the awakening to the mind's tendency to manipulate conditions, the internal conflict that arises in its wake, and finally its relinquishment. Only here, the outside forces are less fixed and change quicker so it's easier to catch the process. The refugees⁴ however remain constant and I always find a way to return to them when the going gets tough. To return to that point of simplicity, silence. To rest the mind in just not doing. It works. To be always at the point of awareness of Dukkha, and to keep pressing that point with gentle attention keeps the flow steady.

*Letter to my Mother, 24th April.
Somewhere in the middle of Macedonia*

I am writing this in a small monastery overlooking a vast plain ringed with mountains. Sheep bells tinkle below and the sun comes in and out of the clouds that hover over the peaks behind us. In the garden below the main house is the church, and beside it several large trees in blossom.

The old nun here, Sister Seraphim, has been ordained for 40 years and is from Bosnia. She came here with a priest to escape the war. The priest is a burly man, about 5ft. 6 inches tall. He has kindly eyes and is a little more backward in coming forwards. However, like everyone else, he has taken on board this monk from a strange tradition without hesitation.

The nun is a great character. She has a withered right arm, deformed from birth, and a pacemaker which she is very proud of. There is newspaper photograph of her coming out of hospital after the operation. She has made it her personal responsibility to make sure that I am overfed and "satisfied". She thinks I am like one of the apostles, and seems to pick up on all the signs of the simplicity of the monk's robes.

Being a monk is an automatic passport to respect, and having been to Mount Athos is the trump card. We make sure to keep quiet about the monks on Mount Athos's views of messengers of Satan, and the Buddhist (non) view about God.

And the rest looks after itself. Human kindness meets human need and a renunciant is always a renunciant and is respected as such.

I know that you would love it here. Macedonia is truly a forgotten part of the world. The villages scattered around the plains are actually more like a collection of farms with a rather quaint attempt at house numbering, demonstrating once again how the random distribution of digits can bring at least the hope of logic and order.

I have never seen peasant life up close before and it certainly sheds you of some illusions. Their life is hard and cruel. One monastery we were staying in was being used as a sheep farm. One of the villagers had come up and was greedily eyeing one of the kid goats that had been frolicking around in the churchyard. We were alerted to its fate by the desperate bleating reverberating around the cloisters. The shepherds weighing the wriggling animal before nonchalantly ripping its throat open. Later, as we were walking through the village below, a woman crazed with grief, reproachfully flung out her hands towards us. She was one of the thousands of Bosnian refugees that had escaped to Macedonia since the war. We left her, excruciatingly aware of how inadequate our response was, in the mud and wreckage of her abandoned present. With the insulated mask of Western comfort stripped away, the one true thing remains: the fact of our existence - suffering.

For the villagers, wholly dependent upon the land, the last few days of rain has been a Godsend as there has been two months without. Farming on a large scale is simply impracticable. Everywhere the evidence of the gargantuan disaster of the Communist experiment is laid bare. Its last vestiges the miserable skeletons of factory farms, or as in Prilep, an ocean of greenhouses spread over an area the size of an airport that had been given up ten years ago.

Ironically, in the face of the grinding poverty around us, one could understand the conditions that had made the Communist dream so appealing in the first place. The dignity and honesty of the peasants reflect the hollowness and guilt of prosperity, and inspire revolution. What remains is a sense of community that we have almost totally lost. To the extent that the impartial forces of nature allow, it is they, not we, who are in charge of their lives - because they are in touch with them.

Tomorrow Marija, who has been our translator guide these last days, returns to Skopje, leaving Paul and I to continue our journey on foot - alone. I will write again soon.

With love

Sobhano

Velushina Monastery, 28th April.

We hit the road after 2pm, trudging down the straight drag out of town. The rain had passed so we decided to try to leave the road, taking the back roads to Bitola, the industrial centre of the South West and the second largest town (one can hardly call it a city) in Macedonia. A velo-moteur however stopped in the road for Paul, and then another car behind him. By the time I caught up, Paul was in conversation with the driver of the car who, having spent 10 years in Australia, spoke good English. He made us an offer of a ride into town which, after two hard days of walking over mountain and down dale, we are hard put to refuse.

We were dropped in the rather shabby-looking centre. The park was full of graffiti-covered sculptures of workers' heroes, ragged urchins, old bag ladies and Albanian tramps who made a very poor job of hassling us. We had a Coke in Marshal Tito square where I struck up conversation with Alexander, a spotty 16 year old with glasses. I talked on Dhamma, but he was more interested in telling me about Aliaster Crowley and the black magic practices that were all the rage in heavy metal circles in Ohrid and Skopje. He took us to the bus stop where we caught a ride South to a monastery where we had been told we could stay.

20 kilometres down the road, we wandered up from the bus stop. Walking through what was becoming a wearily familiar scene; a town of dust and donkeys, barking dogs and perplexed villagers, we saw the monastery nestling in the foothills of the cloud covered mountains above. For no apparent reason I stalled by a foreboding of fear. We rest for a while, but I was still nervous. Later, I discovered why.

After half an hour we reached the monaster, presenting ourselves at the back door. A nun shyly welcomed us into the kitchen which had an air of scrupulous cleanliness. A novice in black appeared, only to be struck dumb with an expression of horror at the sight of us. A friendly young novice priest acted as our interpreter. The only monk in residence, Father Proctor, arrived last. A soft spoken man, not much older than myself, he was making every effort to convey a sense of authority that his soft skin and fresh black beard denied. Having been told to leave the kitchen while they debated what to do with us, we were asked to come in again for a further examination.

Father Proctor disdained to look at either myself or Paul, asking us curtly to explain the newspaper cutting⁵ we had presented on arrival. As our predicament became clearer, I began to feel as though I was helplessly flailing in that same black wave of fear and suspicion that had shadowed us during our visit to Mount Athos. Feeble flickers of outrage rose in my heart, only to be dampened by the absurdity of attempting to resist the ensuing trial. Finally we were instructed to rest upstairs to be summoned later for a further interrogation.

Marshal Tito Square, April 29th.

Continuing from where I left off

After the resident community had eaten we were invited back down to the kitchen. This time we spoke through another translator, an engineer from Bitola who had arrived that evening. Father Proctor sat at the head of the table. His expression a blank gaze, speaking in an icy whisper. The novice sat motionless on the far wall opposite to me. His back pinned upright against the wall, his beard firmly pressed against his chest as though to forbid himself opening his mouth or looking at either Paul or myself directly. The translator spoke to us in a pleasant, but artificially cordial manner.

I tried to explain that, contrary to what the newspaper headline had stated, I was not on a peace mission. That I had come as a friend and, as a fellow monk, I was fascinated to learn about their monastic heritage and did not in any way wish to threaten or undermine their practice. They ignored this, and by way of reply questioned us closely about our visit to Mount Athos, quite plainly doubtful that we were telling the truth.

I resented the interrogation. I resented their arrogance. I resented having to pander to their stupidity and closed mindedness, their posturing and claims to the infallibility of the Orthodox faith. But I kept my peace. They were closed. We were demons. Here they were even less subtle than on Mount Athos. They told us that they had to hold firmly to the rules. That the rules were passed down by God to the Holy Fathers and they were the only true teachings. That it was forbidden for them to pray with members of other faiths. That we were forbidden from praying to another God in this or any other Orthodox monastery. That they were closed to other faiths, but that if they stepped out of the light by compromising their rules, then they would lose their we'llspring of truth. They asked us if we had any questions, but it seemed futile in such a climate to continue.

I could sympathise with Father Proctor's position. Behind the pompous bluff was an insecure young monk pioneering a monastic revival in the face of 40 years of neglect in a society that was largely ignorant, or at best indifferent, to the significance of their spiritual inheritance. The fire of their ardour inflamed the righteousness of their purity. This was a living monastery. A delicate tendril of faith that had been graced by the "stamp of God", (as they put it). Our very existence, if allowed a shred of truth, threatened to unravel an exquisitely arranged theology that supported their conviction in a hostile world.

We went upstairs and while Paul slept I repaired my sandals. Father Proctor was with us again for breakfast at 9am, our conversation as stilted as the evening before. However we were grateful at least for the shelter and the nourishment afforded us. As we stood by the gate to take our leave from Father Proctor,

following the custom I had observed at Mount Athos, I bent to kiss his hand. He seemed wrong-footed, not quite knowing whether or not to take umbrage. I asked for forgiveness (as is customary in our tradition) for any wrong doing or offence we may have caused, which for my part seemed to settle my conscience.

We left quickly, walking further into the mountains to the North, gleefully defying the warnings we had been given at the monastery of the dangerous Muslim villages on the path. The first villagers we met of course invited us in to their homes plying us with fresh coffee and milk. We felt renewed once more with the simple warmth of human kindness. Little ragged children gathered around the house to stare in at these strangers. The woman (not quite as protected from view as in other Muslim villages we had passed through) all wore brightly coloured garments. Emblazoned with stars and flowers in tangerine oranges and dayglo yellow, nylon greens and turquoise blue: they miraculously created the effect of beauty out of the roughness of their lives. Sadly leaving the village, we stopped before midday to eat a Christian-Muslim picnic given by both the villagers and the monastery.

We carried on towards a pass that would take us to the descent ultimately leading back to the next way station on our route, the abandoned monastery of Bukova. A beautiful walk threatened only by the distant rumbling of thunder, but we managed to make it the whole way with the sun still hovering above the clouds as we came down into the valley on the opposite side. As we were approaching the summit of this steep climb we were stopped in our tracks by a sheep dog of gigantic proportions. Paul braced himself, aiming his stick as if to threaten. I instinctively said "relax ... just keep walking", but I was as ready to lash out if need be. We managed to put some space between us and the danger zone, until we could recover our jelly legs and perspiring brows.

Resting at the top of the pass, where the path broke into three different directions, a man leading two donkeys approached. He was wearing camouflaged combat trousers, a leather jacket and a baseball cap with a pistol in a holster, a walkie-talkie strapped to his waist. He spoke perfect English which he had learnt in America working for the English millionaire, Sir Gordon White. He was now the local security, working for the government to prevent sheep rustling between neighbouring villages. Hence the sheep dog of wolfish dimensions. He told us exactly the right path to take, a heaven-sent saviour, as we were about to set off in an opposite direction.

An hour and a half later we arrived at the monastery of Bukova. All the doors were locked, the rickety balconies newly swept. We found a place to settle down for the night in an old kitchen which, having cleared away the fallen masonry and timbers, provided a shelter for our ground sheets. In one corner was an old fireplace which was big enough to roast an ox. We made a makeshift fire and settled down to finish off our last supplies of chocolate and cheese. It was a bit

more of an ordeal than a hotel, but we felt comforted by each other; also, the relief of not having to confront another hostile monk was liberating. We did some chanting and meditated together in the darkening light, drifting off to sleep as the body found its centre.

This morning we walk into Bitola under an overcast sky. Feeling tired all morning after little sleep, we have a light meal of pizza and apple pastries. Wandering through the thoroughfares of the town it begins to rain. I feel overwhelmed with the conspicuous business of wearing robes and I long for a place to be anonymous and head for the square. Unlike in the villages - the robe is a source, not of amazement and curiosity, but of hilarity and perhaps even contempt. While Paul drifts off to look for supplies I hang around aimlessly, eventually finding shelter from the rain beneath a tree in Marshal Tito Square.

Sitting here now it is as though the full impact of the hostility of the Orthodox faith has finally sunk in. This, and the apparent lack of interest among the Balkan people in general to any kind of spirituality let alone Buddhism, makes me wonder what on earth I am doing in this place.

No patience left to wait around.

Feeling nauseous, cold, hungry and alone.

The rain comes down on Marshal Tito Square.

4pm Dolno Dupeni, Lake Prespa, April 30th.

We arrived here at about midday, catching a bus from Bitola via Resen with our second companion and guide also (confusingly) called Marija. She is the mother of the only known Macedonian Buddhist monk in the western hemisphere, Venerable Nyanamangalo, and has taken it upon herself to make sure that we do not escape the overwhelming generosity that only a mother, separated from her son for fifteen years, can give to us needy substitutes. We plan to spend a few days resting in a holiday home she has found for us at the edge of the first of the great inland lakes bordering on Greece and Albania.

We were both very tired and proceeded to nod off on the journey despite the crush of farm folk going back to their villages from the market in Resen. Swarthy people, their faces not unattractive. The women over forty with strong hands and weather beaten faces. The men dusty and brittle with worn out clothes. The children, always the children, cementing the whole group together. A young father, squashed to the back of the bus behind me, lunges forward to pick up his little girl. A mother next to me squeezes a four year old with blond hair and earrings onto a seat that has been folded upright, his eyes completely innocent and trusting. It is very warm when the sun comes out from behind the clouds and we are grateful that the weather is merciful.

I am still parched from the salty food we ate for breakfast, from the coffee which I am beginning to overdose on and from the crush of bodies. We find the house in the village, a holiday home with self-catering facilities. It looks as though it has not been used since the last season but, it is perfect for us. There is a view over the lake, with islands and mountains on the other side. We have blankets, bathroom facilities with hot water and a kitchen. Life could not be better.

I rest fitfully, the window open by my head until the rain comes down, a sudden downpour as a corner of the black clouds looming from the north breaks over us. I would like to be able to stay here for a long time. To learn the language and write novels as the apple blossoms turn to fruit in the Autumn. To spend long evenings discussing the finer points of Dostoevsky and read of Macedonian myths and legends. But in a day or two we will be on the road and I will never be here again.

A cold threatens, my guts have still not adapted to this roaming lifestyle. My mind begins to moan about the way the pattern of the trip has become established as we continually change plans, compromising for one good reason or another the spirit of Tudong. To visit this monastery, to catch a bus here, to stay in a hotel there. I can no longer resist or resent this as I am to a great degree determining the pattern, it is too late to begin the whole thing again, and in some ways this is perfectly all right. The unsatisfactoriness however of not really walking and taking endless side trips bothers me, and that's that.

Meditating last night, the mind was at peace again, and all the internal straining and shouting of the last few days quietened. This is why I am here, I tell myself, just to be here, no more than that. And yet the question looms again and again. What am I doing here? Perhaps I need to just let all the planning, all the concerning collapse before the natural coherence of the journey emerges. Perhaps that is what is missing most.

Monday 2nd of May

Today is a picnic day in Macedonia. Previously it was on the 6th, St. George's day, but after the Communist revolution it was shifted to this day. Walking down from Dolno Dupeni, along Lake Prespa past the holiday cottages and beach houses; young families, old men, teenagers dancing and singing with crazy delight, meandering among the trees, disporting themselves on the day they are free to laugh and forget. We walk up to Kurbinovo Monastery which has famous 12th century frescoes. What's left of them are tantalisingly preserved on the upper levels of the walls, the other surfaces expertly frozen in a delicate pastel collage of plaster and peeled paint. From what we can tell there is a real fluidity of expression and striking clarity of form unlike anything we have seen so far. Unfortunately as a 'Site of Historical Interest' it has received it's spiritual death sentence.

Cars roll up in their tens and twenties. Family cluster to barbecue meat and drink beer and wine. Radios blast out nationalistic folk songs. "Macedonian blood runs pure from here to the Aegan," sing old men with no teeth. There is great heartiness in their expression of joy. Meat and wine, intoxicated blood and black-moustached passion belch out the triumphant songs of failed revolutions. On the tragedy of being born in the Balkans.

Yesterday afternoon, I had gone to practice by the shore of the lake. I felt a looming sense of disorientation, that I didn't know why I was here. Somewhere along the line I'd lost track of the point of it all, so caught up was I in the day to day hassle of getting from one place to another. Sitting, I could experience the tension that had accumulated in the body. Just stopping long enough to acknowledge the mood of pointlessness. Suddenly it all made sense. This is what we're doing all the time. Running away from our own futility. And it's in turning to that that we find release. So in one sense at least I could resolve the futility of my being here - why be anywhere - and to make the intention at least to give enough time during the walk to stop. To meditate, To be.

"Eating-your-own-head", Sunday 8th May.

Walking now through the mountain villages of Western Macedonia, the villages are more spacious, and neater in comparison to the plains villages in the south-east. This morning we reached our destination, "Eating-your-own-head", (as it literally translates from Macedonian) earlier than we had expected. We had time to prepare a meal and to rest our weary legs.

The locals here seem exceptionally friendly. While Paul and Marija took a siesta, I found a place at the bottom of the stairs to strip the bark off a new walking stick I had found earlier. The old ladies of the village came by, one after the other, to jabber at me in Macedonian, to which I nodded vigorously, while generally protesting my ignorance. However their kind smiles spontaneously bursting forth from their craggy old bustling bodies made up for the language barrier.

In the evening we sat under a clear sky drinking coffee with the young man who had shown us to the house we are in now. He was 24 and looked older. He works in a factory in Ohrid, coming back to the village at the weekends where his parent live, and where he has a little land with which to supplement his income. He talked, as everyone does, about the difficulties in Macedonia. The price of lamb has just fallen to almost nothing because all the old trading routes to Italy are closed. He earns about 100 Marks a month in the factory and working conditions are terrible. Prices are high. I tried to make consoling comments that things were also bad for the poor in England, but it was pointless. There was simply nothing one could say, so we listened with sympathy. Marija said later, "everywhere it's the same, people are dissatisfied."

Now I am sitting under the stars on the balcony of the old house. The remains of a week old flu still running through my veins; the body sticky with old sweat, feet cracking and greased with ghee, I listen to the frogs croak and the crickets chirp. There is a magic here that you tap into from time to time. It's a world from the past, that - even in its poverty and hardship, its filth and its dreariness - is beautiful in a way that the Western society is ugly. That is that it's alive. The people are living on the earth, from the earth, out of the earth. Their toil shows in their faces. Their clothes are old and dusty and the land is unforgiving. Brittle and tough. To yield the fruits of their labour they have to sweat in the fields, to wait on their cows. To force their beasts of burden to produce. There is no time for romantic reflections on being at one with things when you're worried about the next harvest. And yet the grind, grinds away the neurotic self concern that so obsesses us. There is a relaxedness, a jovial care they have for each other that makes life worth living.

And yet I know I couldn't do it. I hunger for refinements. I make existential problems out of my life - eating my own head! - that demand meaning, or at least the possibility of understanding. Is it foolish to admire these people with strong hearts from a lifetime of being with the rhythms of the land? Ridiculous to envy those who have not lost the ability to love each other, who struggle to carry on for no other reason than they are here and it is what their fathers have done and their fathers before them? These questions remain unanswered. Like the twilight blinking of the stars, reminding us how little of this universe we can comprehend, save the knowledge of its mystery.

Notes and References

1. **Tudong:** This is a Thai word to describe the monastic practice of wandering. In the Forest Monasteries of the north-east of Thailand it is considered an essential compliment to the routines of monastery life, offering the opportunity to test ones spiritual strength outside of a supportive environment, and perhaps to seek out remote places for solitary practice.
2. **Dukkha:** in Buddhist terms, the underlying unsatisfactoriness of human existence on the mundane plain which, if awakened to, leads to the liberation of the heart.
3. Saints Cyril and Methodius invented what later became known as the Cyrillic script in Macedonia during the 9th Century AD. Originally from Thessaloniki, they later became known as the apostles of the Slavs, however they did not live to witness the results of their work, St. Cyril dying a miserable death in the dungeons of the Vatican.

4. **Refuges:** used here to refer to the Three Refuges of the Triple Gem. The Buddha - the awakened mind, the Dhamma - the Truth of the way things are, and the Sangha - the community of virtuous beings.
5. On the day of my arrival in Macedonia one of the national newspapers published a story on my journey, proclaiming that I was on a "Mission for Peace", which these monks presumably felt was in some way intruding on their patch.

