

The 2003 East-West Spiritual Exchange

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THE EAST-WEST SPIRITUAL EXCHANGE began in 1978, when nearly fifty Japanese Buddhist monks and nuns stayed for month-long periods of practice at various Catholic monasteries in Europe. Since then, every few years there have been similar stays by Christian monastics in Japanese Zen monasteries and by Zen monastics in European Christian monasteries. In 2003 it was the turn of the Japanese to visit Europe, with this year's hosts being the monasteries of Italy. The Zen group, consisting of six monks and one nun, arrived in Rome on 8 September for a three-week stay that was to include ten-day monastic retreats, a symposium in Assisi, and a visit to Rome (to be highlighted by a Papal audience). I myself joined the main group in Rome, after a visit in August to the United States.

My time in Europe began with a stop in England. Although the stop was brief—six hours, with a bus ride from Heathrow to Gatwick airports—I was grateful for the chance to see England again. I lived there for a year in 1963–64, when I was fourteen, and it was one of the happiest times of my young life. England's reputation in America for stiffness and pride was belied by the humor and tolerance I found there, and the accepting social atmosphere at school was appreciated by an adolescent who had always felt like an outsider in the United States.

Heathrow Airport was incredibly crowded, but the customs inspectors remained calm, competent, and pleasant despite the sea of people they faced. The lines moved steadily forward, and I was soon in the lobby looking for the bus to Gatwick. Another calm, pleasant official at the information desk directed me to the bus station, and before long I was on my way, enjoying again a few of the sights and sounds of England—the pop songs on the radio, the rhythms and accents of the speech, and the rural countryside unspoiled by strip-mall development.

A few things struck me even in the brief time I was there. In the forty years since 1964 a wave of immigrants from East Asia, the Caribbean, and the Indian subcontinent has arrived and had children, and that new generation has grown to adulthood. Many of the people working at the airport were of Indian descent, like the attractive young woman handling tickets at the bus station, but spoke with accents indistinguishable from any Londoner. I saw several Indian-Anglo-Saxon married couples as well—inculturation is obviously proceeding apace.

Another noticeable change was the greater willingness of people to speak ordinary middle-class English, even people in occupations (like flight attendants) that in the past would have required a polished accent. Some people might see this as a loss, but I'm not so sure. Upper-class English is certainly easy on the ear, but I find workaday English also very pleasant, with an animated, cheerful quality quite unlike the flatter tones of American English.

After a short flight on British Airways I arrived in Rome. The deplaning passengers were divided into two groups: citizens of EU nations, and everybody else. The EU nationals went through customs with virtually no formalities; we “everyone elses” stood in line for a considerable time before being shooed through the customs gate by a young inspector with a three-days' growth of beard. My flight got in several hours before the arrival of the rest of the East-West Spiritual Exchange participants, so I waited in the lobby observing the life of the Italian crowd. Lively it was, with many hugs, kisses, and shouted greetings. Occasionally arriving groups—apparently Latin American groups on pilgrimage to the Vatican—would break into animated song.

When the rest of the group finally arrived we boarded a minibus and headed toward Rome. Our guide was Father Luciano, a priest who had lived as a missionary in the southern Japanese island of Kyushu for seventeen years, and who thus spoke excellent Japanese. Father Luciano mentioned, as we drove by the thirsty-



1. The vegetable garden at the monastery Santa Croce di Gerusalemme. The wall was once part of an ancient Roman circus.

looking fields, that Italy had suffered a terrible drought and heat wave that summer, so that many of the crops had failed. But, he added, that very morning the first rain in months had fallen on Rome.

Our residence in Rome was the Santa Croce di Gerusalemme Monastery, where a day of orientation was scheduled. One of the oldest Christian sites in Europe, it was founded in 325 to enshrine the relics of the holy cross brought from Jerusalem by St. Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine (the first Christian emperor). The present monastery is a large foundation belonging to the Cistercian order, with a huge church, a library, a museum, and rooms for a large number of monks. It remains steeped in history: the holy relics are still preserved, and a piece of classical Rome is maintained in the high circular wall—once part of an ancient Roman arena—that surrounds the monastery’s large vegetable garden (photo 1).

Like most monasteries in Europe, Santa Croce di Gerusalemme has suffered from a lack of new vocations, and is now maintained by a community of perhaps twenty monks. Several floors of the huge monastery building are presently being leased to a hotel company, which has turned them into inexpensive accommodations for tourists. That is where our group was lodged. Our guide took us to the fourth floor in the elevator, then led us down large, lofty corridors whose white-washed walls seemed still to echo with the footsteps of ancient monks. High in a side corridor a lone bat flew about near the ceiling.

During orientation the next day Father Luciano outlined the basics of Benedic-



2. Yano-san, Brother Marino (with his cat “Neko-san”), and Tom Kirchner.



3. The front of a typical hermitage. The small square window in the entrance alcove was used in the old days to pass food in to the monks.

tine monastic life, then gave us a thorough tour of the monastery with its library, chapter room, refectory, and museum. In the afternoon the Father, a tireless walker, guided us on an expedition to the Colosseum and other sights in central Rome.

From Rome the group separated for our stays at four Italian monasteries. Our departure at the train station was marred by the pickpocketing of the nun's wallet by a band of young gypsy girls, but the nun (a vigorous woman of seventy-two years old) soon recovered her good spirits and was on her way. I and another monk took the train for the small city of Arezzo in north-central Italy. There we met Brother Marino and Father Piergiorgio, our guides to the ancient monastery of Camaldoli high in the Apennine Mountains (photo 2).

Camaldoli was founded about a thousand years ago by the monastic reformer St. Romuald (c. 950–1027). According to legend, in the early eleventh century a nobleman, Count Maldolo di Regginopoli, fell asleep in a mountaintop field and dreamed that he saw saints going up and down a staircase stretching from the field towards heaven. St. Romuald, hearing of this from the nobleman, went to the field and there established a community of hermits. This hermit community is now known as the *Sacro Eremo*, the "Sacred Hermitage." Later Romuald established a communal monastery a bit lower on the mountain; this is now known as the *Monastero*, the "Monastery." Camaldoli is still comparatively small, with only



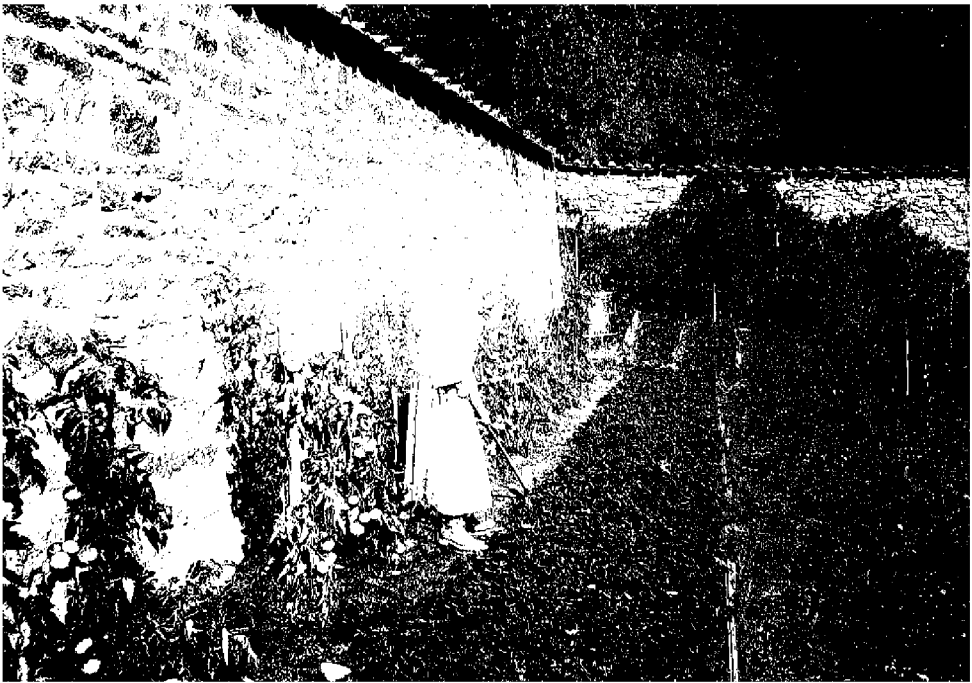
4. A view of the hermitages. In the background is the tall wall that surrounds the entire monastery grounds.

about 120 members worldwide in the entire Camaldolese Order. The Sacro Eremo has huts for about twenty-five monks, plus a church, administrative section, and guest quarters. The Monastero has room for a larger congregation, with a large church and library, meeting rooms, and monks' cells.

Located at an altitude of about 1,100 meters, Camaldoli is surrounded by a vast forest. Care of the forest, including the planting of trees, has been an important part of the monastery life since the time of its founding—it is said that in early times the prior's permission was necessary to cut even a single tree. On the upper part of the mountain, surrounding the Sacro Eremo, are coniferous forests, with pure stands of beautiful beech trees on the mountaintop ridges. Lower down, around the Monastero, are groves of oak, chestnut, and maple.

The huts that the Sacro Eremo monks live in are spacious, with a long hallway (necessary for walking contemplation when the heavy winter snows keep the monks inside), a living space with bed and wood stove, a study, a small private chapel, and a storehouse for firewood. Each hermitage has a large garden in front, which the monks may use as they see fit (photos 3 and 4). Most are landscape gardens with lawns, shrubs, and flowers, but one in front of an older monk's hermitage had been turned into a well-tended vegetable patch (photo 5).

We two Zen monks were lodged in the guest facilities at the Sacro Eremo, and followed the monastic schedule during our ten-day stay (photo 6). The first service



5. Brother Andres (age 83) working in his vegetable garden in the front garden of his hermitage.

was at 6 a.m., with another following shortly thereafter at 7:30 (photo 7). When this ended there was a European-style breakfast (coffee, tea, bread, and jam), followed by a short break prior to morning work. Work seemed arranged on an individual basis, with some monks having assigned duties and others selecting a task in line with their interests. The prior, Don Carlo, enjoyed making the breakfast jam, so most mornings we Zen monks helped him peel the fruit (photos 8 and 9). On the days when Don Carlo was away we were asked to help bottle and label the medicinal liqueurs that the Camaldolese produce as one of their sources of income (throughout its history Camaldoli has been famous as a pharmacy, making many medicines from the herbs and trees on the mountain).

At 11:30 there was mass (11:00 on Sundays). This was often attended by visitors to the monastery, or by local men and women. The monks' liturgical singing had a spare but touching beauty—their years of prayer and psalm-chanting showed in the plain, unadorned quality of their voices.

Lunch followed the mass. Although not elaborate, it was nutritious and well-balanced, with soup to start, followed by bread, salad, cooked vegetables, and usually a simple meat or fish dish. Olive oil, vinegar, and cheese were available, as was red wine (the monks who drank generally only took about half a cup). A bowl of fruit was passed down at the end of the meal. No doubt this balanced, sensible diet had something to do with the general good health of the monks, several of whom



6. Tom Kirchner and Yano-san in front of the Camaldoli gate.



7. During the liturgy at the Sacro Eremo church.



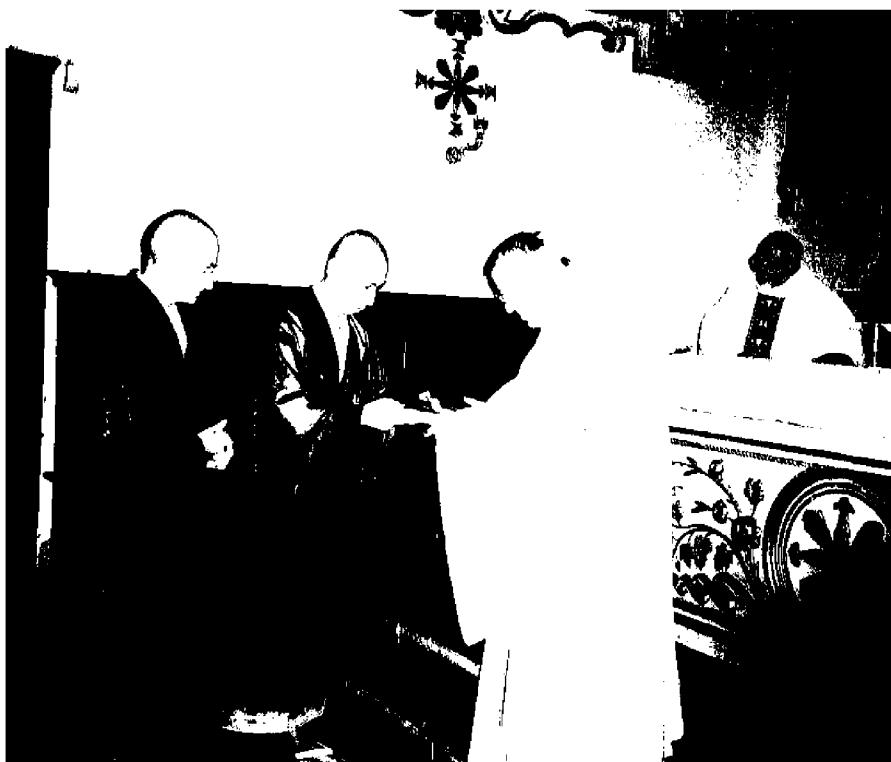
8. With Don Carlo, peeling pears for the breakfast jam.

were in their eighties and still quite hearty. When I commented on this, the monks smiled and said, “Yes, the Mediterranean diet!”

The afternoons were free, with the monks studying or praying on their own or engaging in their various interests. I myself generally took a hike in the surrounding mountains, weather permitting (the weather was generally clear while we were there, though it was a bit chilly in the mornings and evenings due to the altitude—the monks said that in late autumn and winter the mountain is often covered by mist, and the snow can get quite deep). Generally I climbed up to the mountain beech forests—they had a quiet nobility, with many of the ancient trees rising up straight and strong to a height of thirty or more meters. Walking through the larger stands was almost like being in a cathedral. Occasionally the foraging of wild boars could be heard in the distance.

The final liturgical service of the day was at 7:00 p.m., with more readings of the scriptures and chanting of the psalms. This was followed by supper, a meal similar to lunch.

The most interesting aspect of our stay, of course, was our interactions with the monks. The prior-general of the Camaldolese Order, Don Emanuele, is a learned man who speaks several languages and is deeply interested in monastic dialogue. He talked with us for several hours on ecumenical affairs. Among his comments was that the contemplative vocation is an expression of a human dynamic that pre-



9. In the church of Camaldoli, presenting gifts to Don Carlo, prior of the Sacro Eremo. The gifts are from the Institute for Zen Studies in Kyoto.

cedes all religions, and is thus common to all religions. He also said that the monk's goal is "to become a void open to the divine presence," and that "monastic life doesn't mean fleeing from the world, but to be *in* the world with spiritual eyes and heart." Speaking of *ora* (prayer) and *labora* (work), the two pillars of monastic life, he said that prayer is the process of coming to know and love God, and that work is an expression of the realization that humans are not masters of the universe, but, ideally, cooperators with God in perfecting the process of creation (I thought here of the monks' centuries of labor in the forests). After our talk the prior arranged two meetings—one on Buddhist monastic life and one on methods of Zen meditation—for interested members of the community.

The monks at Camaldoli ranged in age from Brothers Emanuele and Marino, in their 30s, to Don Costanzo, a vigorous-looking man of 86. Many of the senior monks, including Prior-General Emanuele, had entered Camaldoli as children of about ten years old—not because they had been placed there by their parents, but out of their own free will. Don Emanuele said that as a small child he had always been fascinated by the mass. One day a visiting Camaldolese monk presided at his village church's mass, and Don Emanuele, struck by how different his celebration of the holy sacrament was, decided to become a monk himself.

In contrast, most of the younger members of the community (those under 50) had entered after a number of years in “the world”—Brother Emanuele had been a factory worker; Brother Marino, an accountant; Brother Ivan, a philosopher; and Brother Alberto, a chemist. Brother Dominico had spent many years practicing Indian religions. Later, at another Camaldolese monastery, the prior—himself a monk since childhood—told me that although this worldly experience had some advantages (the monks tend to know themselves better, for one thing), it put strains on the traditional system of monastic formation, which is a process requiring many years.

I thought about what the world must have been like when the older members entered the community as very young postulants. People who lived during the early twentieth century have written that, before the time of radio, daily life was a quiet flow, with little to disturb the silence beyond normal conversation and the sounds of nature. After supper people would often just sit, waiting till darkness came or watching the fire. The change from such a lifestyle to that of the monastery would have relatively minor—more prayer, perhaps, but similar rhythms of life, and similar surroundings of tranquil silence. For those not especially drawn to the pleasures and pains of secular life, the monastery must have had many attractions.

Nowadays, of course, the situation is completely different. Since the invention of radio and television, and even more since the development of computers, CD players, and video games, the average person has become accustomed to an environment of constant stimulation and distraction. Spiritual questions that used to confront people in their youth are nowadays easily drowned out by the noise; illness and other crises that forced people to face their own mortality are now often deferred to old age by modern medicine and social services. The move from “the world” to the monastery is thus far more radical than it once was, which may be one reason why so few modern people are willing to make the jump at an early age.

Nevertheless, Camaldoli seems not to have suffered as much as other monastic communities. It has in fact been remarkably stable throughout its history, remaining steady in size, staying close to the ideal expressed by St. Romuald, and never needing serious reformation. I suspect that this is largely because of its balanced lifestyle, with appropriate amounts of solitude, community activity, work, study, and prayer. It has never gone to extremes of asceticism (which most people cannot long maintain) or of material excess (which dulls contemplation and sidetracks people into concerns with power and wealth). Camaldoli has, to put it in Buddhist terms, found a good Middle Way.

Moreover, Camaldoli has opened itself to other forms of spirituality. I was not surprised to find out, later, that there is a “Camaldolese Institute for East-West Dialogue,” centered at New Camaldoli in Big Sur, California. It is a testament to this openness that Bede Griffiths, an English Benedictine who explored the cross-fertilization of Christian and Indian spirituality, willed his ashram-style monastery

in India to the Camaldolese Order. This ecumenism seems to me a particularly fruitful direction in the effort to resolve the present crisis in monasticism, in both the East and the West.

After our ten-day stay at Camaldoli, we were driven to Assisi by Brothers Marino and Dominico. As we headed toward Assisi, about two hours away by superhighway, we had a good view of the Italian countryside, with its olive groves, fertile farms, and forested mountains. In Italy as in England, there is none of the unregulated strip-mall development that so mars the American countryside. Ancient castles and monasteries could often be seen on the mountaintops, and entire towns perched on the peaks of high, steep hills, for protection against attack in the war-torn days of old. The fact that the hills were of limestone made this possible, our friends said—with limestone it is possible to sink wells even on the peak of a mountain.

Assisi is a medieval community located high on a hillside overlooking a wide, green valley. The city itself isn't large—you can walk through the winding cobblestone streets from one end of town to the other in less than an hour—but there is much within its confines. Assisi has made a great effort to preserve its heritage, from the Roman temple in the center of town to the castle on the hilltop to the rows of medieval three- and four-story stone houses facing the narrow, cobblestone streets. The stone used in the buildings is a beautiful pinkish-white limestone that brightens the entire town. Viewed from below, Assisi almost shines.

The architecture is dominated by churches, especially the immense Basilica of Assisi (which seemed a worthy rival of the Vatican; see photo 10). Other large churches are Santa Chiara Cathedral and the San Rufino Cathedral. As might be expected, Assisi was full of Franciscan friars and nuns, and the churches and monasteries of that order seemed well-staffed and full of life (in contrast to the local Benedictine monastery, a large complex presently occupied by three aging monks). Pilgrims, both lay and ordained, filled the streets, churches, and inns; at the Basilica a veritable river of the faithful flowed around the grave of St. Francis. It is surprising how the saint's spirit continues to inspire people—one wonders what sort of man must he have been, that his influence is so vital even now, 800 years after his death. I could see no similar devotion at sites associated with other saints, such as Benedict.

The symposium in Assisi was sponsored by M.I.D. (Monastic Interreligious Dialogue), an organization of Catholic monks and nuns interested in the process of spiritual exchange between the world's religions (photo 11). I was impressed by the Catholic monastics' depth of interest in and knowledge of what Buddhism has to offer the Christian contemplative traditions. The interest among the monastics seemed to me very much directed toward a mutual deepening of the spiritual life; dialogue for them is not merely a tool for proselytization. The Exchange helped deepen my conviction that the development of Buddhist monasticism in the West



10. With Brothers Marino and Dominico in the town of Assisi, in front of the Basilica.

should be carried out with due attention to the lessons offered by the Christian monastic traditions. Here is a rather expanded version of the comments I made at the symposium:

If Western Buddhism loses its contemplative side it will perish, and an important part of preserving that tradition will, I think, involve the development of a viable Western Buddhist monastic tradition. I do not think the monastic models that have developed in Asia are necessarily the best for the West—the West has a different culture, and different views of the group and the individual. To develop a monastic tradition that is viable in the West, Buddhists will, I am convinced, have to look very closely at the features that have evolved in Western Christian monasticism and try to apply them in a way that does not sacrifice the vital and distinctive aspects of Buddhist spiritual life.

Among the many things that a Buddhist monasticism in the West might profitably “contemplate” in Christian monasticism are the physical elements of the



11. Interpreting for Rev. Hōzumi Genshō at the symposium in Assisi.

monastic institutions. Although it is true that the life of contemplation involves in many ways a transcendence of materiality, at the same time it is the realm of the material that supports and nurtures the contemplative search. We ignore this aspect at our peril. Western Buddhism would do well to study, for example, Catholic monastic architecture. My Western soul found something very sustaining about the solid stone structures of the monastery and the atmosphere that they create: there is a feeling of solidity and groundedness, and even a certain sense of the eternal. The American Zen teacher Daido Looi has utilized this quite effectively, I think, at the Zen Mountain Monastery, housed in the old stone buildings of a former Catholic monastery in the Catskill Mountains.

Nevertheless, it is important not to overdo things. I doubt if European or American Buddhism would benefit by building the equivalent of the basilicas and great cathedrals that ones sees in certain Catholic traditions. Buddhism needs to find a middle way between extremes of poverty and excesses of wealth. The Hermitage of Camaldoli seemed to me to have found an excellent balance, and I think that that is one reason why its lifestyle has remained much the same over its thousand-year history.

Western Buddhist monasticism (particularly Zen monasticism) can also learn much, I think, from the equality and fraternity of the Christian monastery. The often contentious atmosphere I have seen in Western Zen communities is distressing, and I suspect that it results in part from a mismatch between the individualism of Western society and hierarchical structure of traditional Zen monasteries. Hierarchy comes naturally to the Japanese—they grow up with it, and know how to operate within it in a natural and balanced way. This is not the case with Western-

ers, who, when hierarchical systems are forcibly imposed upon them, tend to overreact, with superiors often turning into martinets and those under them becoming rebels. The Christian monastic approach manages to combine a clear sense of social structure and yet retain the values of Western fraternity. All of the Japanese participants in the Exchange mentioned the harmony and benevolence seen at the monastic communities that hosted them. It would be naive to imagine that interpersonal frictions do not exist in the monasteries, but nevertheless there does seem to be a genuine spirit of egalitarian goodwill. One night after dinner, for example, I saw the prior carrying out the garbage with the newest member of the community, without any sense that the prior was deliberately humbling himself.

Such qualities are fostered, I think, by the Rule of St. Benedict, which for fifteen centuries has helped Catholic monasteries maintain a life of tolerance and moderation. The abbot, for example, is enjoined to be a servant who “benefits the monks rather rather than lording it over them,” who “strives to be loved rather than feared.” Needless to say, the Zen monastic rule too has stood the test of time and has done much to preserve the deep spirituality of the tradition. Yet during its history it has found expressions in which the balance between insight and compassion seems to have been lost. One can only wonder, for example, whether the martial severity of Japanese Zen monasticism contributed to such aberrations as its enthusiastic support for militarism during World War II.

Nevertheless, it is precisely because the spirit of traditional Zen monasticism is in so many ways similar to that of Christian monasticism that I think a cross-fertilization is possible. Both traditions share similar attitudes to work, study, and contemplation; both speak much of “void” and “presence,” and stress “death to self and rebirth in spirit” as the central theme of the monastic endeavor. Methods also overlap—for example, there is much that applies to Buddhist meditation in St. Romuald’s advice to “watch your thoughts like a good fisherman watching for fish” and “empty yourself completely and sit waiting, content with the grace of God.”

What Buddhism can contribute to Christian spirituality, I think, is (1) its experience with the physical side of contemplation (posture, breathing, relaxation, etc.) which it inherited from its roots in Indian spirituality, and which it has refined over the millennia to support and facilitate the interior work of the mind; and (2) its psychological understanding of how the concept of “self” is created by mind processes, and of how to unravel and dissolve those processes through mindfulness and equanimity. If one is to “die to self,” it helps to know what one is dying to. This may be particularly true in the modern West, where forces such as psychology have led to a more clearly developed sense of the ego, and where, at the same time, secularization has led to a steady weakening in our sense of the sacred.

The essential task of the monastic, “death to self and rebirth in spirit,” may, I think, be approached from two directions—the direction of the self, or the direction of the divine. At the risk of great oversimplification, it might be said that Buddhist contemplation takes a “from the self” approach, with the idea that when the processes of the self are thoroughly understood, the self is seen to be fundamentally void and an opening takes place to the world that lies beyond self—the world of the

divine. Hence the direction of practice in Buddhist monasticism (at least in Zen Buddhist monasticism) tends to be “from the inside out,” with comparatively less emphasis on the devotional side of religious practice and a greater emphasis on discovering and manifesting the truth that lies within.

A similar approach is seen in classical Christian monasticism, of course, with its emphasis on examining the ways of the self, renouncing thought, and opening oneself to the interior silence, or void, in which God can manifest. Yet I have often heard from Catholic monastics that this side of the Christian contemplative life has greatly weakened over the past few centuries. My own impression—and here again I risk oversimplification—is that Christian monastic life presently emphasizes the “direction of the divine” over the “direction of the self.” That is, the stress appears to be much more on surrender to the divine than on understanding of the self, perhaps with the goal that if surrender to the divine is fully realized then the limited ego dissolves of itself into the divine consciousness. Thus the direction of practice in Christian monasticism appears in many ways to be “from the outside in,” with an emphasis on creating an atmosphere of devotion and holiness that, over the course of a lifetime vocation, will gradually penetrate to the core of the monk’s being.

The appeal and the effectiveness of this method may have been diluted, though, by modern humanity’s crisis in faith and strengthened sense of ego. A religious approach that works directly with understanding and deconstructing the concept of “self” may be a particularly effective alternative for many people in the West, and provide an opening for those to whom faith and devotion are difficult. Indeed, an inability to accept “faith” in the conventional sense of the word can even be seen as an advantage in this approach, where awareness, inquiry, and the dropping of self-generated images are central.

At the same time, there is a danger in Buddhism—and particularly in Zen Buddhism—that the highly refined techniques can work against themselves. For example, a certain type of intuitive mind does very well with the koans, and, given sufficient time, can complete the entire koan system with little inner transformation having occurred. The entire purpose of Zen training—*koji kyūmei*, “the investigation of the self”—is thus reduced to a series of intuitive insights that can leave the ego stronger than before. As the scandals that have all too often occurred in Western Buddhist centers show, the results can be disastrous. The Christian emphasis on the necessity of a true “change of heart” in the spiritual life is every bit as important for Buddhism.



Before leaving Assisi we made a visit to the town of Portiuncula, on the plain below the city. It was here that St. Francis was originally buried near a small stone chapel that the saint particularly loved, and that in its stark simplicity seems to symbolize Francis’s own religious life. Symbolic too, perhaps, is the fact that over this chapel

and Francis's original grave (his remains were subsequently reinterred at the Basilica) has been built the immense and ornate church Santa Maria degli Angeli.

From the church we went to the station and boarded the train to Rome, for sight-seeing and a papal audience prior to our return to Japan. The first day the group divided into two, one half going with Father Luciano on a tour of Rome, the other going with Michiko Nojiri (a tea-ceremony teacher living in Rome for the past forty years) to Subiaco, a scenic town in the Apennines with important historical links to Christian monasticism. I joined the second group. Nojiri-san took us first to the Monastery of St. Benedict near Subiaco, where St. Benedict, the founder of Western European monasticism, meditated in a cave for several years as a hermit. The monastery, built right on an almost vertical cliff face, is a testament to how religious devotion can inspire people to build monasteries virtually anywhere, from Tibetan mountaintops to rocky Greek shorelines. The views were beautiful, and the monastery itself full of interesting artwork and statuary accumulated over its many centuries of existence. As we looked around I noticed the abbot guiding a group of Italian visitors. I was interested to learn later that he is English.

Next Nojiri-san drove us to another site with ties to St. Benedict, the monastery at Vicovaro. The monastery is closed to the public, so she phoned ahead for the abbot to open the gate—Nojiri-san seems to have an enormous network of friends and acquaintances throughout Italy. The monastery is located above the river Aniene, on top of a high and very sheer limestone cliff. The cliff is riddled with numerous caves, where Benedict spent several years with a community of hermits before moving to Subiaco.

Walking down steep steps carved in the cliff during Roman times, we soon reached the caves, which still contain religious artwork, altars, and other paraphernalia; many human bones can also be seen. Continuing farther down the steps, we saw several tunnels bored into the cliff, large enough for a man to easily stand in. These, Nojiri-san explained, were maintenance passages for long underground water conduits that formed part of the ancient Roman aqueduct system. We went into one of the passages, and sure enough, several meters in there was a large, smooth tunnel running parallel to the cliff face. The Aniene River, Nojiri-san said, was an important source of water for Rome; dams channeled the river water into three separate conduit tunnels, which eventually emptied into the enormous aqueducts that carried the water the rest of the way to Rome. Already by the time of Benedict the tunnels were out of use, but the hermits employed the stair systems and other facilities.

That evening, after we returned to Rome, we visited an old monastery that presently serves as the headquarters of a Catholic lay group. This group is made up of people with homes, jobs, and families who nevertheless wish to live a monastically oriented lifestyle, including work among the poor and sick. Interreligious dialogue is also a major interest. This approach to lay practice seemed to me one that

might prove particularly appropriate for the Church as it moves into the twenty-first century. Another such approach is, I think, provided by the groups that practice Eastern forms of meditation while continuing to attend mass and receive the Catholic sacraments.

The group is surprisingly large and active—every evening the members fill an enormous nearby church for a service, run by laypeople, with prayers, a sermon, and some of the most moving religious song I have ever heard. I felt I could have listened for hours, utterly absorbed. As at Camaldoli, I sensed how religious music can so deeply touch the heart in a genuinely spiritual way, even in one as unmusical as myself. The lyrics play a part, of course, but I think it is a minor one—I understand no Italian or Latin, yet found the Italian religious song no less compelling. Like meditation, good liturgical music seems able to pull one into the present moment.

The next morning we arrived early at the Vatican, only to be told that the Pope was indisposed and would be unable to appear that day (it was an unexpected development, one that made the world news that day and set off a round of speculation on the Pope's health). Following a short meeting at the headquarters of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, our group was led to an auditorium for an audience with Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the Vatican's Secretary of State. The auditorium was enormous, like an aircraft hanger, with seating for what must have been well over 10,000 people. On the stage sat two rows of cardinals, all with broad red sashes over their ample bellies; behind them were a variety of special guests. Our group was honored with a place in the first row of the main hall.

Finally Cardinal Sodano arrived and the ceremonies started. After a short message from the cardinal the list of groups at the audience was read, followed by a tape-recorded message from the Pope. At the end of the ceremony a select group of people from the audience lined up for short meetings with the cardinal; there were a number of handicapped people, many newlyweds, various friends of the cardinals, and representatives of the many groups of pilgrims that had attended the audience. We too had our meeting and handshake with the cardinal, all duly recorded by the Vatican photographers. We then went off for a tour of the Vatican, followed by lunch and a visit to the spacious apartment of Nojiri-san for an informal tea ceremony.

The next day the rest of the group departed early in the morning for their return to Japan. My flight was the following day, so I remained in Rome to place an order for the Vatican audience photographs and to do a final bit of sight-seeing. I arrived at the Vatican photo office early in the morning, but failed to locate our group's photos even after several tours of the room. After a while the director of the office spotted me in my fruitless search, and, on his own initiative, started looking over the photos himself but with an equal lack of success. Calling to me, he said he remembered our group from the day before and had no idea why the pictures

weren't there—he apologized with the genuine concern that I have so often sensed in Italians, said he'd contact the photographer, and asked that I come back later in the day (they were there when I returned at three).

From the Vatican I walked across town to visit the Monastero San Gregorio al Celio, the Camaldolese Order's community in Rome. There I met Brother Sabino Marsico, whose name had been given to me by Brother Marino of the Hermitage. Brother Sabino is a practitioner of *shiatsu*, the Japanese finger-pressure therapy that I too have studied. I enjoyed hearing his views of the connections between this therapy and the spiritual life. There is an innate wisdom in the body, he said, that connects with the wisdom of nature, and thus with the wisdom of God. Through a practice like *shiatsu*, which uses the body's natural curative forces, Brother Sabino feels that we can come to understand more about the workings of that divine wisdom. He hopes someday to study in Japan; I gave him the address of Rinsen-ji, where I live in Kyoto, in case he ever has a chance to visit.

Walking through Rome, I was once again impressed by the weight of history and tradition, with ancient buildings and massive ruins everywhere. I must admit, though, that by the end of my short stay I was beginning to find the atmosphere a bit oppressive. Unlike Assisi, which wears its history lightly, Rome seems burdened by its past. Its nickname is the Eternal City, but it seemed to me rather a monument to the transiency of even the grandest of human achievements. The Romans built for permanence, but the stones have shifted and the bricks have crumbled, and the ruins stand lonely in their fenced-off enclosures.

And yet the life of the city goes on. Rome seems active nearly 24 hours a day, and much of that life is out on the streets and the city's wide sidewalks. And the Romans, like the Italians I met everywhere, seemed warm, life-loving, and thoughtful of others. That, perhaps, is Rome's true eternity.