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# NEW MONASTICISM

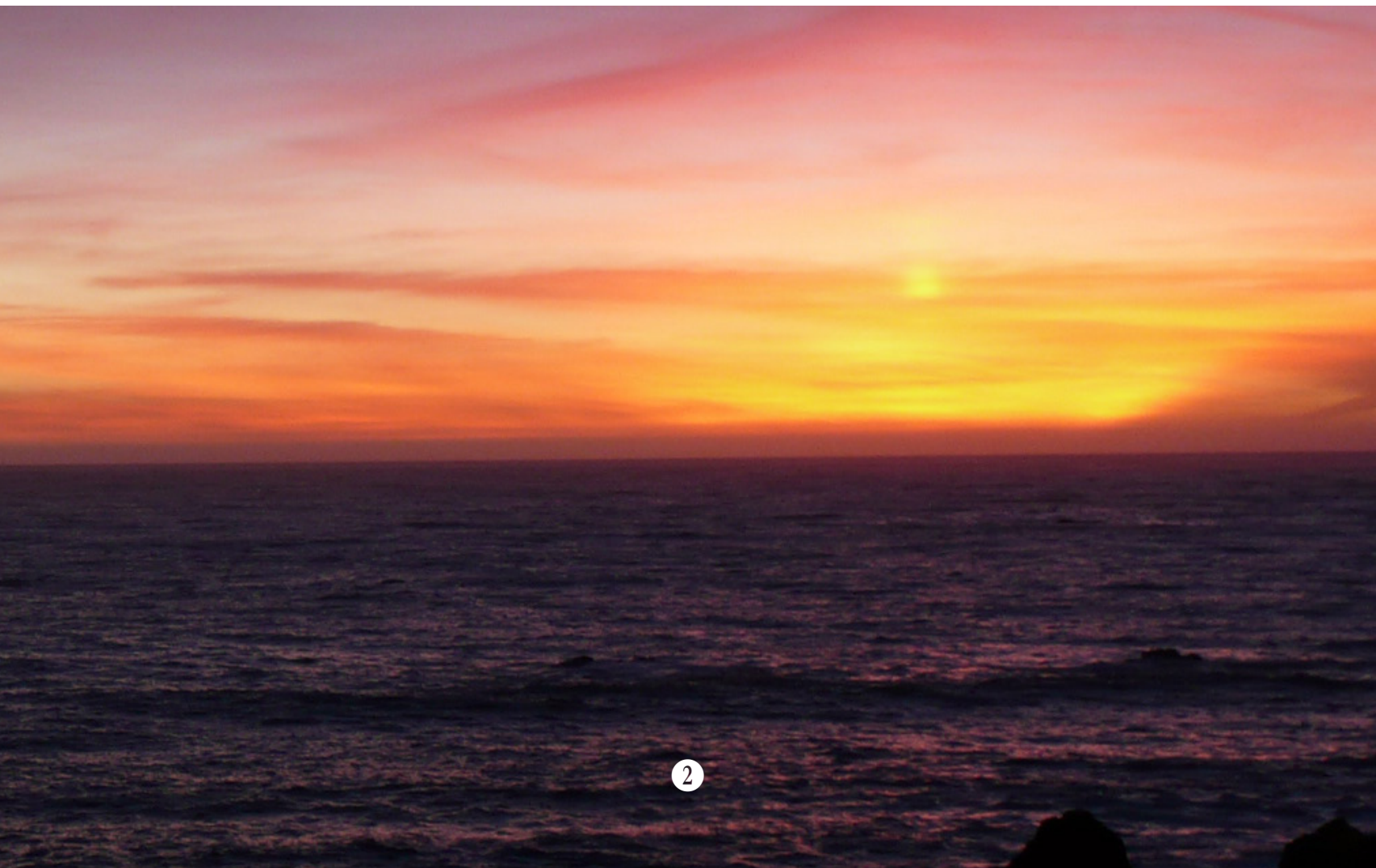
An Interspiritual Manifesto for  
Contemplative Life in the 21st Century

By RORY McENTEE & ADAM BUCKO

# In Gratefulness

There have been many inspirations and guides on the road to new monasticism.

Before we begin we must offer our deepest gratitude and thanks to all whose ideas, lives, mentorship and presence have brought us here. To name but a very few of these pioneers: Father Bede Griffiths, Ramon Panikkar, Thomas Merton, Father Thomas Keating, Brother Wayne Teasdale, Andrew Harvey, Matthew Fox, Kurt Johnson, Cecil Collins, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Dorothy Day, Pir Hazrat Inayat Khan and Pir Zia Inayat Khan, Catherine Doherty, Madeleine Delbrel, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Father Richard Rohr, Mother Teresa, the Hermits of Peace at Sky Farm Hermitage, Brother Francis Ali and Sister Michaela Terrio, and many others, with special gratitude to those Sufi and Hasidic wisdom makers for whom “the world was never taken outside of the monastery”...







# Prologue

**“What we seek is an experience that transforms our lives and incorporates us into the destiny of the universe. We are looking for an intuition capable of giving us an orientation in life, even if for the time being, for our being in time.”**

Ramon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being*

As we look out at the world today we take inspiration from what is happening around the globe, from young people participating in movements like the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, to the new monastic movement among evangelical Christians dedicated to prayer and radical service to the poor; to the conversation of an “Emerging Church” (“...not a new religion, but a new way of being religious”), to small groups of Muslims who are gathering together, allowing women to lead worship, and reinventing what it means to answer God’s call, to “engaged Buddhism”, blending the sublime practices and compassion of the Buddhist path with social activism, to the “spiritual but not religious” youth, who are beginning to take responsibility for their own spiritual lives outside the walls of our traditional religious institutions.

We see these movements as spiritual impulses, moving us away from an era of fixed dogmatic religious formulations and embedded power structures. These impulses are awakening a whole new generation of people across the globe. These are people who are not interested in imposing a new and fixed rule, but rather want to commit to a daily practice of “putting aside their egos” and exploring what it means to create a world that works for all; a world that is rooted in the principles of direct democracy, mutual aid, trust in our “original goodness”, and a radical acceptance of each individual and the unique gifts they have to offer.

These movements need the deep contemplative wisdom of our human race to ultimately be successful; without this, the movements risk playing a diminished role in the ultimate triumph

of the human race. It is the triumph of the Human Soul (in totality) that we all await, and our lives long, consciously or not, to serve that birth. It is only through a contemplative path, a path leading to spiritual maturity, that this service is ultimately achieved.

New monasticism aims to take on this responsibility; cutting across traditions, across academic disciplines, across vocational differences, across the secular and the holy...breaking boundaries and building bridges to a contemplative life for the 21st century. Traditional monasticism has long held this space for the human race. Yet traditional monasticism has seen its glory days pass by, and increasingly serves a diminished role, particularly in western society.

New monasticism looks to embody this role in a substantive way; not through moral laws, dogmas, or new creeds, but through supporting the unique and indispensable flowering of every individual and community on earth. This support comes through dedication to a deep and disciplined contemplative life and a life of service to all.

New monasticism is an intra-traditional manifestation of the Bodhisattva, an incarnate symbol of our basic humanness, our "basic goodness", and above all of our unity as one being. It is a manifestation of "the mystical body of Christ," the revelation of the one Being among us, in which "we live and move and have our being." It is to this audacious goal that new monasticism dares to foresee, more than dares, sees only it, and pledges one's life to becoming an ordinary, disciplined loving expression of its attainment.

**“Let us be in harmony in our intention,  
in harmony in our hearts  
in harmony in our minds  
that we may live in concord.”**

Rig Veda X



# Prelude

**“Let us establish ourselves in the divine milieu.  
There we shall find ourselves where the soul is  
most deep and where matter is most dense.  
There we shall discover, where all its beauties flow  
together, the ultra-vital, the ultra-sensitive,  
the ultra-active point of the universe.  
And, at the same time, we shall feel the  
plentitude of our powers of action and adoration  
effortlessly ordered within our deepest selves.”**

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*

The arc of our discussion will follow the way of creation...we will begin at the beginning, which is to say with the beginningless...the original idea of Man, the Purusha, the archetype of the monk. We then follow its distillation through the course of time, weaving its way into our contemporary milieu, transmuting itself into ever new forms, yet always in fidelity to the primordial impulse. We heighten our awareness as it seeps into the practical grist of our modern lives...and open our hearts as it disappears once again beyond the horizon of time. We allow that bright burning sun to stream down its warmth, love, and wisdom; on us, within us, and among us, as we give birth to the varied beauty of new monasticism...

For this we pray and in this we delight.

# The Beginningless: The Archetype of the Monk

**“I speak of an aspiration and an urge. It is not because one wills it that one becomes a monk.**

**The monk is compelled, as it were, by an experience that can only articulate itself in the praxis of one’s life. It is an experience of the presence of the goal of life, on the one hand, and of its absence (of not having reached it) on the other.”**

Ramon Panikkar, *Blessed Simplicity*

Can there be a prelude to the beginningless? Nevertheless, here ourselves we find. We begin our discussion with what makes a monk a monk, looking through the window of traditional forms into the interior dimension within the human being that gives birth to the monk. We then turn to the evolution of these traditional forms into what we call new monasticism. By evolution “we imply both change and continuity; something which is not just an unfolding of the past, but which also makes use of an underlying identity.”<sup>1</sup>

Throughout our discussion, and particularly in its early stages, we will make generous use of Ramon Panikkar’s *Blessed Simplicity: The Monk as Universal Archetype*. Ramon Panikkar was a man of remarkable cross cultural understanding, which makes him particularly pertinent for our discussion here. He was a Catholic priest, who also became a Hindu and a Buddhist, and once famously remarked, “I ‘left’ as a Christian, ‘found’ myself a Hindu and ‘return’ a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian.”<sup>2</sup> In addition to his cross religious exploration, Panikkar held doctorates in philosophy, chemistry, and theology, spoke eleven languages, and wrote in six of them. It is hard to find another person who was able to immerse himself so completely in such diverse cultural milieus.

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1 Panikkar, Ramon, *Blessed Simplicity: The Monk as Universal Archetype*, Seabury Press, 1982, p. 92

2 Panikkar, Ramon, *The Cosmotheandric Experience*, Orbis Books, New York, 1993, Intro., p. v

Blessed Simplicity, the outgrowth of a symposium between monastics from both eastern and western traditions and non-monastic contemplatives, is a seminal work on the emergence of new monasticism from traditional forms. It reads like a symphony from the depths, and as one yearns to share rather than improve upon Mozart, we will quote from it extensively. Panikkar's book puts forward the thesis that the monk represents a constitutive dimension of the human being, which he dubs the archetype of the monk. "...an archetype [is] a product of human life itself [and is therefore] mutable and dynamic...To speak of the archetype of the monk...assumes that there is a human archetype which the monk works out with greater or lesser success. Traditional monks may have reenacted in their own way 'something' that we too may be called upon to realize, but in a different manner."<sup>3</sup>

So what is this constitutive dimension of the human being? This archetype of the monk? "We may have no other entrance into the archetype than to study or come to know the monk as archetype."<sup>4</sup> It is the monk who has most often represented this ideal among the human family. When we look at the monk and peer deeply into "those aspects of the human being that are most rooted in his nature... [we find that] the monk ultimately becomes a monk as the result of an urge, the fruit of an experience that eventually leads him to change and, in the final analysis, break something in his life for the sake of that 'thing' which encompasses or transcends everything."<sup>5</sup>

"By monk," Panikkar writes, "monachos, I understand the person who aspires to reach the ultimate goal of life with all his being by renouncing all that is not necessary to it, i.e., by concentrating on this one single and unique goal. Precisely this single-mindedness, or rather exclusivity of the goal that shuns all subordinate though legitimate goals, distinguishes the monastic way from other spiritual endeavors toward perfection or salvation..."<sup>6</sup>

Yet the monk is also a personal affair, "An indefinite number of people can realize, each uniquely, their own perfection. Humanity is manifold. In this sense the perfect human nature does not exist..."<sup>7</sup>

The transition occurs when we see the traditional monk as "only one way of realizing [this] universal archetype...If the monastic dimension exists at least potentially in everybody, the institution of monasticism should be equally open to everybody...The monastery, then, would not be the "establishment" of the monks, but the schola Domini, the school where that human dimension is cultivated and transmitted...Here appears the consequence of our distinc-

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3 Panikkar, Ramon, Blessed Simplicity, p. 7

4 Ibid., p. 8

5 Ibid. pp. 8-11

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid. p. 13

tion between the monk as archetype, i.e., the monk as a paradigm of religious life, against the archetype of the monk, i.e., the human archetype lived out by the monks, but which may also be experienced and lived today in different ways.”<sup>8</sup>

All of us, at some time or another, have felt stirrings of what the monk aspires to, whether religious, atheist, or agnostic. We have all had moments of “transcendence”, moments of deep passion for<sup>5</sup> justice and truth, outpourings of compassion for others in suffering, or a perfect feeling of love towards our partner or children. These moments are part and parcel of our human experience. They touch a hidden dimension inside of us. The monk is, in some sense, the person who recognizes the legitimacy and the primacy of these moments. She resolves within herself to get to the “heart of the matter”, as it were, and to explore from whence these moments arise, to peek through the doorway into which they point. This “peering” eventually moves beyond a mere curiosity, and becomes the all consuming goal of one’s life. Many people today, and in particular young people, may have had such immanent and yet transcendent experiences, and may be feeling deep within the enchantment of this calling, yet without the desire or need to enter into a monastery or even to follow a particular religious tradition.



# New Monasticism: Monks In the World

**“May the time come when men, having been awakened to a sense of the close bond linking all the movements of this world in the single, all-embracing work of the Incarnation, shall be unable to give themselves to any one of their tasks without illuminating it with the clear vision that their work—however elementary it may be—is received and put to good use by a Center of the universe. When that time comes to pass, there will be little to separate life in the cloister from the life of the world. And only then will the action of the children of heaven (at the same time as the action of the children of the world) have attained the intended plenitude of its humanity.”**

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*

The new monk is an ideal, an aspiration that lives in the minds and hearts of our contemporary generation.”<sup>9</sup> The model of traditional monasticism was one of turning away from the world, of simplifying one’s life, and of renouncing many of the comforts and impulses of life in the world. Traditional monks were usually celibate, often lived apart from others and in isolation, and aimed for the blessed simplicity that would bring them into the fullness of their being. However, “The whole challenge of modern monkhood,” Panikkar asserts, “consists in the impossible attempt—at first sight—to acquire by its simplicity the fullness of human life.”<sup>10</sup>

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9 Ibid. p. 29

10 Ibid.

This is what Panikkar calls “simplicity through integration...The modern monk does not want to renounce, except what is plainly sinful or negative; rather he wishes to transform all things...he is not interested in stripping himself of everything but in assimilating it all.”<sup>11</sup> As for our use of the moniker new monk, Panikkar confronts the issue head on, “It could be that in the last analysis we would prefer to do away with the word “monk” altogether and find another less overburdened one, but this would not prove that what the contemporary monk intends does not correspond to what the ancients were trying to do.”<sup>12</sup>

We assert that new monasticism names an impulse that is trying to incarnate itself in the new generation. It is beyond the borders of any particular religious institution, yet drinks deeply from the wells of our wisdom traditions. It is an urge which speaks to a profoundly contemplative life, to the formation of small communities of friends, to sacred activism and to discovering together the unique calling of every person and every community.

Perhaps we should pause here for a moment to elaborate on what is meant by contemplative. Thomas Merton beautifully describes the state of contemplation in *New Seeds of Contemplation*. “Contemplation is life itself, fully awake, fully active, and fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness, and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent, and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source. It knows the Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes beyond reason and beyond simple faith. It is a more profound depth of faith; a knowledge too deep to be grasped in mere images, in words, or even in clear concepts. It can be suggested by words, by symbols, but in the very moment of trying to indicate what it knows the contemplative mind takes back what it has said, and denies what it has affirmed...”<sup>13</sup>

“Contemplation is also the response to a call: a call from Him Who has no voice, and yet Who speaks in everything that is, and Who, most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being; for we ourselves are words of His. But we are words that are meant to respond to Him, to answer to Him, to echo Him, and even in some way to contain Him and signify Him. Contemplation is this echo. It is a deep resonance in the inmost center of our spirit in which our very life loses its separate voice and resounds with the majesty and the mercy of the Hidden and Living One...It is awakening, enlightenment, and the amazing intuitive grasp by which love gains certitude of God’s creative and dynamic intervention in our daily life. Hence contemplation does not simply “find” a clear idea of God and confine Him within the limits of that idea, and hold Him there as a prisoner to Whom it can always return. On the contrary,

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11 Ibid. pp. 33-34

12 Ibid. p. 27

13 Merton, Thomas, *New Seeds of Contemplation*,

contemplation is carried away by Him into His own realm, His own mystery, and His own freedom.”<sup>14</sup>

From Panikkar, “Contemplation is that activity which situates us in an open space from which we can observe and contribute to the course of the universe...that activity that delights in the well-being of all being. The contemplative life is simply life; life in its fullest sense: for some it is the discovery of the person or of the human being; for others, the discovery of the being of all beings. At any rate, [contemplation finds] the value of each being lies in its being what it is, not in what it does or has...The central point is the development of the core of the human person to its fullest – in whatever sense this core or this fullness may be interpreted.”<sup>15</sup>

Traditionally, this dedication to a contemplative life stressed the primacy of being over doing, while the new monk “stresses the unity of being and doing...true action is contemplative and authentic contemplation acts.”<sup>16</sup> The goal and struggle, or perhaps it is the play, of the new monk is to incarnate the fact that the spiritual and contemplative life includes action, and that action does not have to be in opposition to contemplation. In fact, action can become contemplation. The new monk works toward a new way of being in the world where one becomes an expression of Spirit, a form through which God can live and work in the world, an empty vessel through which the Buddha-mind manifests.

Through contemplative prayer and practice one comes upon a deep state of receptivity and listening, openness and spaciousness, and from here one senses an inner impulse and then moves in accordance with this action. One becomes aware of a perfectly functioning field which fits everything together into a seamless whole with the utmost sensitivity, love, wisdom, and compassion. This awareness is not opposed to action. In fact, without this integrated action contemplation cannot be said to be complete. St. Theresa of Avila captures this need for action within contemplation in Christian terms:

“Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks with Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.

Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.”

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14 Ibid.

15 Panikkar, Ramon, *Blessed Simplicity*, pp. 45-46

16 Ibid., p. 46

The new monk hears the pains and moans of a new creation taking place all around him and cannot turn away from the suffering. He feels “that the shaping of this world is a religious and even a contemplative concern not alien to or at odds with the monastic vocation... [and finds that] the demons and asuras of the cold and lonely regions have been converted into the shouts and cries of the human milieu...the daily papers with their news have been converted into spiritual reading.” (BS-43, 50) The modern monk feels at the root of his soul a calling to the contemplative life, but “cannot renounce the secular world because he does not believe it to be secondary; cannot renounce activity in the world because he believes this to be indispensable.”<sup>17</sup>

This leads the new monk into a radical intuition of the “holiness of the secular.” This is one area where the evolution we spoke of in the beginning may be seen more clearly. By secular, we refer not only to a peculiar independence from any particular religious institution, but also, in a mysterious sense, to an independence from a purely eternal and immutable “nature of things.” In other words, by the holiness of the secular, we mean the holiness of all that exists in this world. Panikkar describes the secular as the “temporal character of things,” and goes on to describe this intuition: “This temporality is now being taken not only as something that matters, but as something definitive. Instead of being just fleeting, passing, ephemeral, the temporal structure of the world now represents a coefficient of reality that cannot be eliminated...[it] is no longer considered something you can dispense with, or even utilize in order to reach something more important.”<sup>18</sup>

The modern monk “tends towards the secular, without thereby diminishing his pursuit of holiness...Secularity represents the affirmation that the body, history, the material world and all temporal values in general are definitive and insuperable...that it is legitimate to be involved in temporal affairs, that time has a positive value, and that the religious person must occupy himself with reforming the very socio-political-historical structures of reality...It means the incorporation of the divine in the human and its impregnation of all the structures of the material world...If this represents a mutation in the conception of the holy, it equally signifies a parallel revolution in the experience of the secular. The secular is no longer that which is fleeting, provisional, perishable, contingent, and so forth, but is rather the very clothing of the permanent, the eternal, the immutable...”<sup>19</sup>

This intuition naturally leads the new monk into all areas of the human arena, notably into the areas of embodiment, intimate relationships, environmental concerns, community building and politics. The new monk sees the body as a holy incarnation and part of her spiritual work is in maintaining a healthy, nurturing and transformative relationship with it.

17 Ibid., p. 83

18 Ibid., p. 60

19 Ibid., p. 55-56



New monasticism also encourages intimate relationships, both deep and meaningful friendships and committed and loving sexual relationships. New monasticism is concerned with discovering the divine nature and proper place of all relationships. It is not opposed to celibacy; rather it recognizes it as a profound and genuine calling, albeit a rare one. However, it equally recognizes that celibacy is not a necessity for the working out of the archetype of the monk.

New monastics acknowledge the gap between idealized intimate relationships and the reality that is most often lived out, and call on each other to help heal these wounds and to build true intimate relationships based on integrity, trust, spiritual friendship and love. They want to see the spirit enter into all arenas of human life, and because of this “seek a spirituality that is not exclusively spiritual... Not only will [they] not scorn any human value, but [they] actually attempt to cultivate them all...the monk loves everything that exists and is even passionate about everything human, without excluding the material and the temporal.”<sup>20</sup>

It may be said that the new monk hears the words of Jesus not only as “The Kingdom of Heaven is within you”, but equally and perhaps more substantively as “The Kingdom of Heaven is among you.” They find the need to work out their salvation through relationships...with each other, with the Kosmos, with their work in the world, and with Ultimate Reality; however they may conceive of or be initiated into It. As such, no human endeavor remains beyond their reach, and it is in their struggle to uplift all they see as valuable in the human condition that they find their unity with one another. They feel themselves participating in the ultimate act of creation, the incarnational act of bringing spirit into form and transmuting form into spirit.

Another point of departure from the traditional role of the monk comes in the area of spiritual direction. More often than not, the new monastic is not drawn to the traditional ideas of obedience to a superior or total dedication to a guru. While respecting traditional roles and many of the successes they have borne, the new monastic finds spiritual direction most often in the depths of spiritual friendship. A story that illustrates this new inclination comes from a time when one author approached a quite popular spiritual teacher to ask him if he would be his spiritual director. The teacher replied, “Under one condition; that you will be my spiritual director as well.”

The new monastic recognizes beyond any doubt the necessity of elders, the need for spiritual direction, and the great gift afforded to her by those who have advanced further along than she. She struggles to develop her sense of discernment, and her spiritual mentors are indispensable to her as a means to reflect back her own decision making process and with whom to check her insights. She sees this spiritual direction as the most profound blossoming of

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20      Ibid., p. 55-56

friendship. Friendship becomes the keynote of the new relationship between mentor and mentee, between teacher and student. One is reminded of the apocryphal story of the Buddha and his attendant, Ananda. Ananda asks, “Dear Buddha, is spiritual friendship half of the journey to enlightenment?”

The Buddha replies, with a grand smile, “No Ananda, it is the whole of the journey.”

This notion of spiritual friendship helps the new monk to recognize the importance of human communities, which is how one might define “politics” in its pure sense. He or she is interested in building communities that are sustainable, infused with a sense of the sacred, and support their members to discover and live out their sacred vocation in the world. The efforts to build sustainable and enriching communities extend beyond a mere comfortable existence for themselves. In it, they see part of their mission to help all of creation; to show once again how human beings can live in supportive, sustainable and nurturing environments. Their care extends not only to others, but to the natural world around them and to all living creatures.

The new monk may be an artist, a scientist, a spiritual teacher, an elementary teacher, a social worker, a waiter. It is not so much the job that matters, as the place from which they approach their work. Their work cannot be separated from their spiritual path. They endeavor to bring a heightened awareness, intimacy, and authenticity to their work, whether this may be washing dishes or feeding the poor. Obviously, there are some professions that the new monk could not participate in, such as ones involved in the building of weapons, open degradation of the environment, or the exploitation of others for profit. Most professions, however, are not only open to new monastics, but are in desperate need of the mindfulness, kindness, and infusion of grace that they endeavor to bring into their lives.

Monetary considerations matter not to the new monk, yet she is not naïve in these matters. She understands the way the modern world works, and is pledged to work intelligently within it, but she cares not for the convenient notions of “success” in our modern age, too many of which are but thinly veiled aggrandizements of the ego and excuses for the exploitation of our environment and other human beings. Our modern “productive society” is but a sad and ephemeral notion at best for the new monk, and at worst is an insidious, demoralizing, and demeaning way of life for the human spirit. To the modern monk, a truly “productive society” would allow ample time for leisurely retreat, prayer, meditation, and reflection of the soul.

The key point may be summarized as the new monastic does not see a split between their inner and outer lives. The new monk is “in the world but not of it,” as Jesus taught us to be. He “playfully plays the game [of life in the world]...but does not abide by the rules...and in playing changes some of the rules—at the risk of his life, obviously. For by changing the rules

he will eventually change the game..."<sup>21</sup>

For the new monastic, there is only his or her life and how that life may best serve the greater whole. This is an intensely personal movement for each individual, and the question of vocation becomes an important one for the new monastic. The new monk must struggle with this question of his "calling", for it is as unique as one's own individuality.

This discovery of one's vocation, calling and gifts is once again about the unity of contemplation and action. Contemplative action arises from receptivity and listening, some may say that the action arises from a consenting to God's action in us, or from a clear and subtle perception of the primordial working of the Buddha-mind. This action may take an infinite number of distinctive forms; however, it is essentially action as an expression of healing, wisdom, compassion and love. The action itself is very unique to who we are and to the situation we are in, and utilizes all of our life experiences and gifts. It is an action through which we truly become who we were born to be.

Once it arises out of the contemplative space we have created in our lives, our crucial responsibility is to say "yes" to it. This requires not only willingness, but also patience and discernment. In doing this, we begin to answer the universal calling to incarnate the fullness of our being and begin to bring a transforming love into the world. True contemplation is not really contemplation in its fullest sense until it includes this "yes", and within this "yes" also arises a "no". This is a "no" to all the elements of this world that violate our love, compassion, and sense of justice. Through this process arises the prophetic voice of the new monk, the "Sacred Activism" of Andrew Harvey, the prophet as a "Mystic in Action" a la Matthew Fox, and the conscientization of Brother Wayne Teasdale, "the awakening of a deeper awareness of problems that require of us some kind of response, especially where people are suffering."<sup>22</sup>

This requires the new monk to think deeply and intelligently about his actions, and about how those actions affect the well being of all. The new monk recognizes that all of his actions have universal consequences, whether arising from a contemplative space or not, and his goal is to allow all of his actions to arise from his "contemplative reservoir." He endeavors to discover his true calling, how he may best serve the Kosmos, and trusts in the inner action of his spirit. This is not an individual project, but proceeds in discernment with his mentors and sangha, or community of spiritual friends.

In the end, it is the person's dedication to an engaged, contemplative life and a life of intelligent service to all beings that makes one a new monastic. The new monk seems to be tasked with the impossible; to build nothing less than the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. She cannot

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21 Ibid., p. 93

22 Teasdale, Wayne, *A Monk in the World: Cultivating a Spiritual Life*, New World Library, 2003, p. 138

just tear down the old society. She is pledged to build it not just for herself, but for everyone. Especially for those who find themselves on the bottom rung of our society, the poor and oppressed, the criminals, the mentally afflicted and sexually abused...“the salt of the earth” as Jesus told us.

Yet her compassion does not stop there, with her keen eye the new monk sees the desperation in the faces of Wall Street and the loneliness and despair of soul of so many of the rich and privileged, and she works for them as well. The religious fanatics, who have so twisted the spirit and message of love of their founders, also fall within the breadth of her compassion. The new monk is to build this new world not by violence, but through the force of her compassion, prophetic voice, wisdom, and love; and through the mobilization of all those who will stand with her. That is the work of the new monastic, to incarnate a new world that will allow for the unique flowering of the spirit of every individual and community on Earth.



# Building Bridges: Contemplative Life in the 21st Century

**“Time is not an accident to life, or to Being...  
Each existence is tempiternal...ever old and ever  
new. Our task and our responsibility are to  
assimilate the wisdom of bygone traditions and,  
having made it our own, to allow it to grow.  
Life is neither repetition nor continuation.  
It is growth, which implies at once rupture  
and continuity. Life is creation.  
If creation is an act of contemplation, as Plotinus  
says, real growth would be to reenact in a  
contemplative way our partnership in the very  
creative activity of reality.”**

Ramon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being*

In the beginning we spoke of an “evolution”, implying “both change and continuity; something which is not just an unfolding of the past, but which also makes use of an underlying identity.”<sup>23</sup> As we speak of contemplative life in the 21st century we now turn our sights to a fundamental element of success for the new monastic movement, the relationship between our living spiritual “elders” and the new monk. By our “elders”, we refer to those precious souls who have gone before us in their journey to spiritual maturity, the vast majority who have done so mainly within the structures of established wisdom traditions. Father Thomas Keating, a Catholic Benedictine monk highly regarded as a spiritual master, poses a question of great importance to the new monk: “[T]he most precious value that the world religions have in common is their accumulated experience of the spiritual journey. Centuries of Seekers have

23 Panikkar, Ramon, *Blessed Simplicity*, p. 92

discovered and lived its conditions, temptations, trials, development and final integration. This wealth of personal experience of the transcendent bears witness to the historical grounding of our contemporary search. It is not just a passing fad. At the same time, this vast reservoir of practical wisdom inherited from the past raises an important question for Seekers. Can one transcend the empirical ego and false self without plugging into the spiritual tradition of one of the world religions?"<sup>24</sup>

The new monk recognizes that the world's wisdom traditions contain within them the wisdom, transmissions, and lineages she aspires to assimilate within her and give birth to in the modern world. Much of this wisdom is contained not only in our elders' words, writings and presence, but also in the structures that have grown up around the attempts to pass on the wisdom of the tradition. These structures themselves help to curtail certain dangers along the path, and have built in mechanisms to help seize and guide those moments when the spiritual path reaches one of its many climax points. Like a "cat at the mouse hole", spiritual directors and the methods they develop help us to recognize these moments and to remain alert and ready for them. They also subtly direct our efforts and orient us so that our struggles may bear fruit. Perhaps most importantly, they serve as a trusted "cultural background" and testing board for us to hone our own powers of discernment and discover our unique truth. It would seem that they are indispensable fountains of knowledge for the spiritual aspirant, of which certainly the new monk is.

Yet we must recognize that we are living in many ways in a post-religious and interspiritual world. Many young people no longer connect in such a profound way with our wisdom traditions. In recent surveys, around 30% of the American population declared themselves "spiritual but not religious"<sup>25</sup>, and this number ballooned to 75% of Americans between the ages of 18-29<sup>26</sup>. As for the future of monasticism, the world's wisdom traditions are struggling mightily to recruit young monastic vocations. The language of our religious institutions is no longer speaking to young hearts and souls. Can the answer to our contemporary situation really be to tell young people they have to connect with a religious institution in order to come to spiritual maturity? Is it possible that the impulse driving people beyond the walls of established traditions is itself an incarnation of the Holy Spirit?

We believe that here we are seeing the need for a new movement; a movement that can respond to the needs of today's changing world while preserving the deepest truths and insights of our wisdom traditions. We, as a generation that is still in touch with our elders, have a solemn obligation to assimilate and pass on this wisdom to the younger generation. However, in doing so, we cannot just pass on traditional forms, for those no longer speak to

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24 Keating, Thomas, Seekers of Ultimate Mystery, Contemplative Outreach Newsletter, June 2010

25 Newsweek, 2009

26 Clayton, Phillip, Letting Doubters in the Door, L.A. Times, March 25, 2012

so many of our youth. Instead, we are being asked to translate those truths in a way that they can be relevant to some of today's most pressing questions and younger minds. We need a movement that can articulate a new universal framework, a framework for a contemplative life in the 21st century. This framework must be able to inspire a new contemplative life and new contemplative communities, ones that will change hearts, transfigure lives and relationships, and help us to birth a new world. In this endeavor we need the wisdom and guidance our elders can provide. Hence we see the importance of this dialogue and a mutual desire and need; the need for our elders to pass on their wisdom, and the need of the new monk to receive, assimilate, and translate it for a new generation.

This dialogue between the keepers of the collective spiritual wisdom of our planet and the path to be incarnated by these new monks is of prime importance; bridges must be built. In light of this, and in consultation with some of our most respected elders and mentors, we call into life a "Colloquy for New Monasticism." We see this as a universal network of contemplatives that brings together some of our most esteemed elders and young contemplatives to articulate what this new path and new tradition can be. We feel that if properly nurtured it can provide an opportunity for contemplatives, young and old, from various traditions, to be present with each other in a way that these new inspirations are calling us to; a way that is intimate, democratic, and reciprocal. We envision a model advocated by the founder of the Quakers, George Fox; one of being present with each other in a way that can enable the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to come through every one participating. This, we trust, will inspire friendships, communities, and new frameworks for doing contemplative life in the 21st century.

We envision this new framework as a highly decentralized and yet interconnected way of incarnating unity in diversity. It will embody a new type of leadership, a new way of building spiritual communities, and a new way for elders and youth to collaborate with one another. This new leadership becomes more about being able to relate to others in a way in which transmission becomes possible, allowing everyone to discover their gifts and offer them to the whole, and share them in a way that is free and non-hierarchical. At times it may not even be clear who the leader is, for leadership just happens as everyone discovers their gifts and engages them in service of compassion and justice.

We envision all communities subscribing to some general principles, but being free to actualize new monasticism in a way that feels true to their vocation, as individuals and as communities. Some communities may reflect a more formal monastic life, with vows and robes, while others may be very much embedded in the world, yet deeply centered in the contemplative way of life. Each one could create a path that is integrated, that does not see contemplation and activism as opposing factors in life, and that is committed to transfiguring all domains of life, be they personal, institutional, religious, economical, or political.

Individuals within a community could embody different vocations as well. These communities become a way for those who aspire to a contemplative life to come together and begin to “build the Kingdom of Heaven one friendship at a time.” This can be true of small networks of friends as well as larger intentional communities. Each community will have a unique expression and each may have a slightly different spirituality. Some could be Christian, some Hindu, some Muslim, some Buddhist, some Jewish, some a mix of two or more traditions, and some more purely interspiritual...yet all would have a resonance with basic principles.

What are these basic principles? His Holiness the Dalai Lama begins to articulate them in his new book, *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World*. In it, His Holiness argues that “the time has come to find a way of thinking about spirituality and ethics that is beyond religion,”<sup>27</sup> and he attempts to create a basis of shared values through what he calls “inner values.” “By inner values I mean the qualities that we all appreciate in others... We all appreciate the inner qualities of kindness, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, and generosity, and in the same way we are all averse to displays of greed, malice, hatred, and bigotry. So actively promoting the positive inner qualities of the human heart that arise from our core disposition toward compassion, and learning to combat our more destructive propensities will be appreciated by all.”<sup>28</sup>

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27 The Dalai Lama, *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011, Intro., p. xv  
28 Ibid., p. xi



# An Interspiritual Path

**“The essential marvel of the divine milieu is the ease with which it assembles and harmonizes within itself qualities which appear to us to be contradictory...**

**In the divine milieu all the elements of the universe touch each other by that which is most inward and ultimate in them. There they concentrate, little by little, all that is purest and most attractive in them without loss and without danger of subsequent corruption...**

**At the heart of the divine milieu...things are transfigured, but from within. They bathe inwardly in light, but, in this incandescence, they retain—this is not strong enough, they exalt—all that is most specific in their attributes.”**

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*

The word interspiritual was first coined by Brother Wayne Teasdale in 1999 in his book, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions*. In the last decade, the interspiritual movement has exploded onto the scene, now registering close to 50,000 hits when searched on Google. The word was used to denote the phenomenon of the world's wisdom traditions moving beyond interfaith dialogue (which refers to the traditions coming together to learn about one another, their beliefs and rituals, and engendering deep respect and trust with one another through dialogue) to the actual sharing of “spiritual technologies” and mystical realizations with each other on an experiential level. It also connoted a dawning recognition that the world's wisdom traditions, far from being at odds with

each other, could be viewed as a common heritage of humankind's spiritual wisdom; "... varied insights scattered like so many precious seeds among the religions are viewed as belonging to the inclusive domain of the mystical."<sup>29</sup>

Brother Wayne intuited the "spiritual but not religious" movement, and predicted that interspirituality would embody the future direction of humanity. "The real religion of humankind can be said to be spirituality itself, because mystical spirituality is the origin of all the world religions. If this is so, and I believe it is, we might also say that interspirituality—the sharing of ultimate experiences across traditions—is the religion of the third millennium."<sup>30</sup>

Dr. Kurt Johnson, in his new book *The Coming Interspiritual Age*, makes a powerful argument for seeing the interspiritual movement in the context of humankind's evolutionary process. Dr. Johnson describes interspirituality as "the natural discussion among human beings about what we are experiencing...about who we are, why we are here, and where we are going... interspirituality is [also] the movement of all these discussions toward the experience of profound interconnectedness, unity consciousness, and oneness."<sup>31</sup>

Dr. Johnson goes on to further expand upon Brother Wayne's vision, "the primary vector of our species' spiritual and ethical development wasn't any one of the world's countless spiritual paths, but the shared direction of all of them...their historical development has been a single experience on behalf of humankind—an unfolding existential convergence continuing to this day and defining an aspect of the maturation of our species...Interspirituality, then, starts from a different understanding of religion. Even as a teaching, it begins with the view that the entire religious experience of our species has been a single experience that has been unfolding through many lines and branches, together empowering our species for ever higher evolution. In other words, interspirituality recognizes a common experience within all spirituality. It acknowledges a shared origin, shared process, and shared maturing."<sup>32</sup>

Interspirituality in this context is concerned with the human family as a whole. This leads one to an intuition of what might be called the tradition, the human tradition. The human tradition sees all of Humanity in the evolutionary process of maturation. Here Humanity finds itself responsible not only for all of its constituent parts, fellow human beings, but also for all creatures on our planet and the well being of our mother earth, Gaia. The human tradition recognizes that to shoulder our responsibility we must strive for spiritual maturity and find ways to assimilate and pass on the collective wisdom of our race. This tradition "knows no

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29 Teasdale, Wayne, *A Monk in the World*, p. 175

30 Teasdale, Wayne, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions*, New World Library, 1999, p. 26

31 Johnson, Kurt, *The Coming Interspiritual Age*, Namaste Publishing, 2012

32 Ibid.

bounds” except those of the human race itself. In this blossoming, we are all integral parts, yet we all also contain the whole. The microcosm is a reflection of the macrocosm.

So how is the new monk to approach this understanding in terms of their own spiritual path? To be sure, some new monks are and will be called to incarnate their path within a particular established wisdom tradition. Yet they must also be willing to view paths other than their own as wholly legitimate ones leading to spiritual maturity. The Vedanta Society, the monastic order based around the spiritual genius of Ramakrishna, an Indian saint, embodies this philosophy. Within the Vedanta Society itself four main paths are articulated; the path of bhakti yoga, the path of devotional love; karma yoga, the path of selfless service; jnana yoga, the path of knowledge through nondual realization; and raja yoga, the royal path of meditation. However, practitioners are asked to choose only one path and concentrate on that. Even very advanced practitioners are discouraged from engaging more than two. Yet, all paths are recognized as wholly legitimate and fruitful, as are the paths found in other wisdom traditions outside of the Vedantic tradition.

Many new monks will also be called to follow the path that has been carved out by the majority of our elders. This consists of growing strong roots in one tradition, and from that vantage point branching out to drink deeply of the wisdom of varying traditions. This can be seen in the example of Christian monks becoming Zen roshis or cultivating the advaitic experience (non-dual realization) found in the Hindu Vedas and Upanishads. There are many examples of this path, including the examples of Thomas Merton, Father Thomas Keating, Brother David Steindl-Rast, Father Bede Griffiths, Brother Wayne Teasdale, and many others. This path has been so popular that it has become somewhat of a clarion call among many of our elders that one should become firmly established in a particular tradition before experimenting with others.

However, the new monk may not always find one of these more traditional paths to be the case, and there are other roads the new monk may take. There is the way of “multiple religious belonging”, recently discussed eloquently by Matthew Wright, a young contemporary new monastic, in his Master’s of Divinity thesis, *Reshaping Religion: Interspirituality and Multiple Religious Belonging*. This path includes visionaries such as Lex Hixon and Father Henri Le Saux, also known as Abhishiktananda. This path consists of fully embedding oneself in multiple religious traditions. As Wright explains, “Such a person does all she can to truly understand the new tradition from the inside out—taking initiation and involving herself in the community, worship, study, and prayer of the second tradition, while also maintaining the similar requirements of her original tradition. As is obvious, this requires hard work, and it is not for everyone. Because of this, I place multiple belonging in the special category of vocation. It is essentially an act of faith, and one must be so called...”<sup>33</sup>

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33 Wright, Matthew, *Reshaping Religion: Interspirituality and Multiple Religious Belonging*, M.Div.Th., 2012, p. 12

“Different religious traditions, on the level of doctrine and historical formulation, are often contradictory, and the multiple-belonger must confront this reality head on, if they are to maintain honesty and integrity. They stand fully in both worlds, allowing the apparent contradictions, and often historic wounds inflicted by one tradition on the other, into their souls. Out of this tension, one waits for something creative and healing to emerge—which requires deep trust in the calling.”<sup>34</sup>

There is also a more wholly non-traditional path, which we would like to discuss more fully here, as it has been the path traversed by the authors. It is perhaps the least articulated one to date. For lack of a better word, we refer to it here as an interspiritual path, though we note that all of the ways mentioned above may be considered interspiritual. This interspiritual path may not include being fully embedded in any of the existing wisdom traditions. It stems from a universal recognition of the potential of the human being for spiritual maturity as the basis of one’s path, and cognizes clearly the interspiritual vision of the wisdom traditions as a common heritage for humanity. It also hints at a more radical understanding of our spiritual traditions. Not only are they all paths to spiritual maturity, but in a mysterious sense one feels that they may complete one another.

Each wisdom tradition may hold a puzzle piece as to the ultimate flowering of Humanity. This view recognizes that each tradition has explored and emphasized subtle differences of the human experience, thereby becoming experts on differing aspects of our human potential, as well as discovering potential pitfalls and ways to navigate them as we journey along our path. Each tradition contains pure gold nuggets of human understanding, but none have a complete picture. In this understanding of interspirituality, each tradition is both teacher and student, having both something to offer and to learn. In *The Mystic Heart*, Brother Wayne proclaimed, “In the end, I am convinced that the religions complete one another’s understanding of ultimate reality.”<sup>35</sup>

If the new monk finds himself on this path it will most likely be out of a sense of being “guided” into it. However, there are dangers that one should be aware of when embarking on this path. It should not be undertaken simply out of a sense of curiosity or exploration. While those traits are encouraged, they are not sufficient. This path requires the guidance of elders on traditional paths and a high level of integrity and responsibility. The new monk must be keen to dig deep rather than shallow wells, to choose one’s spiritual mentors wisely, and to remain vigilant of the confrontation with one’s own ego.

One must avoid the “new age” pitfalls of walking a shallow spiritual path that comforts rather

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34 Ibid.

35 Teasdale, Wayne, *The Mystic Heart*, p. 26



than transforms the ego. One thing the new monk can be sure of; that he will encounter parts of the journey in which he will shrink from the true transformative process of the contemplative life, as have all who have gone before him. Demanding as it does, perhaps many times over, an uncompromising “death process”, the new monk on this path must soberly assess whether without the framework of a traditional wisdom tradition and the guidance of an established spiritual mentor who has walked the territory before him, will he really be able to see himself thru?

One might ask, why even mention a “new path”? Is not the spiritual path already fraught with such difficulty that we may be only adding burdens to an already Herculean task? And who cannot doubt these pitfalls as one surveys the deadened spiritual milieu of the new age, the shallow “feel-good” and “positive thinking” spiritual paths, too afraid to confront their shadow and deal with the dark cocoon of spiritual alchemy? This is a difficult question to answer. Perhaps it will suffice to say that the new monk on this path has a deeply felt sense that it would be a rejection of her true “path” to do otherwise.

She feels at the root of her soul that her relationship with God, her identity with the Buddha-mind, Life Itself, has guided her into it; and continues to guide her through it. Her fidelity is to this impulse, to this inspiration of Spirit, and she could no more rid herself of it than she could her own heartbeat. She seeks and needs the guidance and discernment of her elders, but her spiritual maturity, her path, is ultimately her own responsibility, and belongs to her and her alone. The fruits of her path belong to all.

We have found that an invaluable aspect of this path, in addition to a disciplined, daily spiritual practice such as meditation, mantra recitation, or “present moment” and awareness practices, is building relationships and receiving spiritual direction from our elders. When this is done with integrity, respect, humility, surrender and deep spiritual yearning, one may receive from these elders a true and authentic spiritual transmission. Yet this transmission is not based on one’s complete acceptance of the elder’s tradition. It includes elements of the tradition, but is in essence the elder’s experience of Ultimate Reality as he or she has experienced it within their tradition. They are passing on their lived experience of this human life and its relationship with Ultimate Reality.

This infusion process requires a certain humble disposition, one which is not naturally cultivated in our Western societies. It concerns, in a sense, the ability to “bow” in deep gratitude to another. The Venerable Chogyam Trungpa captured it well when he once said [paraphrasing], “Transmission is like pouring tea into a cup. The cup must be lower than the teapot. This is just a statement of fact. It does not contain any hierarchy. If the cup is not below the teapot, the tea will not end up in the cup.”

This path is perhaps a great bridge of incarnate understanding for a new generation. It is a path that may be able to assimilate many of our spiritual lineages without becoming fully embedded in, or beholden to, the religious frameworks that surround them. It is particularly those on this path who are tasked with bringing into existence an understanding for the youthful generation who aspires to the great ideals of humanity, but needs the deep wisdom of our collective spiritual paths, elders, and transmissions to embody those ideals. It is not a theoretical path, but one that has grown out of the praxis of the authors' lives.

All paths of an interspiritual nature are revolutionary. While they may not lead to a complete understanding of Ultimate Reality, they certainly increase our understanding of Humanity within Ultimate Reality. They require us to re-evaluate our traditions in the light of contemplative experience, in the revelations of other traditions, and in the context of what we have learned about the world through science and psychology. They also ask us to be mindful of the impulse that is incarnating in the new generation, and how we might pass on the wisdom we have inherited.

We end this section with another gem of wisdom from Brother Teasdale's *A Monk in the World*, capturing some of the pitfalls and pearls of these interspiritual paths: "In a sense, to pursue an intermystical spiritual life is to be a real pioneer of the Spirit. It is not an easy path to travel, because not many maps exist yet, and many people fear losing their way, but it yields rich deposits of wisdom along the way. If we trust, keep moving on, and share our experience with others, while seeking their advice, we will be fine. In fact, uncertainty can lead to even greater spiritual realizations. Without the familiar rituals and beliefs of our tradition to fall back on, we sometimes come closer to realizing the true goals of religion."<sup>36</sup>

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36 Teasdale, Wayne, *A Monk in the World*, p. 175



# Epilogue:

## Touching the Horizon

**“There is no word impossible for God.’  
And this is precisely the task, to achieve what  
at first glance seems quite impossible: to unite  
Heaven and Earth, Flesh and Spirit, the World and  
God, Masculine and Feminine, Secular and Sacred.  
‘The Buddha Way is unattainable.  
I vow to attain it!’”**

Ramon Panikkar, *Blessed Simplicity*

We situate new monasticism in terms of a movement, an organic arising of a deep desire to live a meaningful life and serve the world through our work and our compassion. It grows out of the desire to incarnate a contemporary spirituality, one that drinks deeply from the wells of human wisdom that have been dug throughout our ages, but one that also speaks to our modern sensibilities, to the unique occurrence of the coming together of the human race as one world, and that addresses the multiple and complex needs of a humanity in the throes of transition into a new and better world; a world where our differences are understood within the context of our unity as human beings, and where our diversity is celebrated, encouraged and supported; a world where what we do is worth much less than who we are, and what we produce is judged in terms of its sustainability and its contribution to the betterment of human relationships and the easing of suffering on our planet. The new monk may well be the beginnings of a physical manifestation of what is already true in the spiritual worlds, where a connected and collaborative effort of spiritual energies and truths work together and in harmony for the good of all life on our planet. This can be seen in the new monk’s ability to move seamlessly between wisdom traditions, art, music, solitude, hard work, community, and friendship.

New monasticism is a search for the deepest humanity in us all. It is in this search that we are all united, not only to our fellow “monks”, but to all who long to birth a new world that lives and breathes of the Spirit, to all who desire to come to the utter depths of their being, and then to enter the world through that doorway. A new monk is one who feels the calling to her own Evolution, her own depth of Spirit, her own transformational path, and responds. She embarks on this path in order to better serve all of Life, not knowing where this journey will take her, but knowing that she can no longer view anything in her life as separate from this journey. She is motivated by her ideals of love and compassion for others, as well as an impenetrable belief in the Truth and Reality of human spiritual maturation; of its transformative power, grace and sustaining ground. She is committed to serving the world in growing degrees of sacrificial love, skillful wisdom, and joy. Any such person may rightly be called a “new monk.”

# A Note on Praxis

Praxis is the process by which a theory, lesson, or skill is enacted, practiced, embodied, or realized. Without praxis, the vision remains just that, a vision. The interspiritual movement has grown exponentially in its first decade, and there is much to learn from the work that has been done. Praxis, or how we work out these theories, ideas, insights, and realizations in the practical details of life, and in the midst of a society which not only does not support the contemplative life, but in many ways is outright hostile to it (at least in the Western world), is for us at the “heart of the matter.” In bringing forth the following vision, we must be willing to learn from the past, to constantly reassess both our theories and how they are being applied, and must stay true to Jesus’ dictum, “By their fruits ye shall know them.”

## Authors

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