



## WEST MEETS EAST

Dana Wilde

“ALL I’M TRYING TO DO IS WAKE up,” I said to the monk.

He smiled widely, as practically all Chinese people—and Tibetans like this monk—do. His attentive brown eyes glinted the way you imagine the eyes of the Maitreya Buddha will probably glint one day. His hands were folded in his lap over his tan robe. He looked at my friend Huang Renda and began speaking in Putonghua—ordinary Chinese.

When he finished, Huang Renda said, “The master says you are ready to come to the monastery, if you want to. But if you can’t, if things in your life are still requiring your attention, you can just keep doing what you’re doing and that will be enough.”

“What does he mean, ‘keep doing what I’m doing’?”

They exchanged a few more words

in Chinese. “He means you should keep teaching because you are a good teacher.”

“Mr. Huang,” I said, “please tell him I’m uncertain about this. For years I’ve known that the things I’ve been trained to teach are not what most of the students really need.”

“What do you mean?”

“I learned to teach people to analyze—to use their rational intelligence and logic to approach everything, even poetry. And I’m good at it, actually, there’s no point in pretending to be modest. But in the last ten years or so I’ve realized that most Western students believe the only real knowledge is rational, and so enormous ranges of their lives and consciousnesses are blanks. They don’t need more rational exercises. They need to recognize their own emotions and what they might mean. As much as they can, they need

—previously published in *Xavier Review*, 2006

to recognize that their other faculties—their intuition, their moral sensibilities, their spiritual awareness—are kinds of real knowledge too. Important kinds. We can use the word ‘spiritual’ here inside the temple, but it’s a tricky word in a Western classroom.”

Huang Renda, a native of Quanzhou, which nine hundred years ago was probably the largest and most dynamic seaport in the world and a confluence of religions from Buddhism and Taoism to Manichaeism and Christianity, smiled too with that resonant Chinese warmth. “But that’s why you are a good teacher, because you know poetry is understood in the heart.”

“I know it,” I said, “but I have trouble taking my own practical advice. I know almost nothing about things of the spirit. I’m like the blind leading the blind.”

Huang Renda repeated this to the monk, who listened patiently and then laughed. He spoke at length. All speaking in China is at length.

“It doesn’t matter,” Huang Renda finally said in English. “The master says you are doing the best you can, which is all anyone can do. If you make mistakes, it doesn’t matter. You just keep working.”

I thought about this for a moment, then remarked, “Rumi said, ‘Straying maps the path.’”

The monk got up and talked while he poured more hot water into our small

handleless tea cups, where green weeds floated serenely.

“The master says you can do good works by translating Buddhist sutras.”

“But I don’t know Chinese,” I said. “And anyway, I know so little about Buddhism that I’d probably misrepresent the teachings.”

They conversed again. At length.

“The master says you can learn.”

“I hope so,” I said.

When it was time to go, the monk expressed regret that I was leaving China and we wouldn’t be able to talk further. He gave each of us a *pusa*, a small book outlining instructions for how to pray for spirits trapped in the Avici hell and suffering horrible pain without hope of escape. As we stepped out his door, he put his palms together gracefully and bowed. I tried to do the same, but it felt extremely awkward.

As we walked out of the Nanputuo Temple, with the green rocky hills of Xiamen rising behind us, I said to Huang Renda that the same spiritual life is described everywhere, in all cultures, but in different ways. Sometimes the descriptions appear so different on the surface that they seem totally unrelated to each other. Some Western scholars argue that Buddhist mysticism has no similarity to Christian mysticism, for example, that they are different products of different cultures. But as far as I can

tell, I said, they are virtually identical. They approach the same experience from different angles. How is the Avici hell any different from the hell depicted in Dante’s *Inferno*? “Abandon all hope you who enter here,” it says over the entrance to Dante’s hell.

Huang Renda, a student of religion, mysticism, poetry, and martial arts, agreed with me. “The same voice is listening to us all,” he said.

“The problem for us is to notice the fundamental patterns that are the same in Plato, Lao Tzu, Buddha, St. Paul, Plotinus, Hui Neng, Rumi, and Dante,” I said. “The trouble is, the actual patterns are almost impossible to talk about. You don’t notice them by rational analysis, and that’s why the scholars go wrong when they say Buddhist and Christian mystics are saying different things. You notice them by other means.”

We walked past the city buses, the dark-skinned Chinese women hawking incense in front of the temple, and the big pool where the brown remains of lotus plants littered the water. In a few days, I would leave mild Xiamen and return home to Maine’s spruces, rough in the distant, icy glitter of the January sun.

“When Dante had journeyed almost to the top of Mount Purgatory,” I said, “he turned to say something to Virgil, who had guided him through the pits of Hell and up the slope toward Eden. But before

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Dante could speak, he saw that Virgil had vanished.”

“Who is Virgil?”

“Virgil was the great Roman poet. In Dante he represents the rational intellect. He led Dante through Hell and Purgatory. But at a certain point in the journey, the rational intellect becomes impractical and no longer useful. Dante’s consciousness has reached a new level. He is ready to navigate, not by rational thought, but by intuition and moral sensibility. So Virgil disappeared, and Dante continued into heaven under the guidance of Beatrice, who is a figure of, among other things, love.”

“I didn’t know that,” Huang Renda said, “but it accords exactly with my understanding.”

“That’s what I mean,” I said. “I wish I could speak Chinese.”

“We are all translators,” he said with a crafty smile. 🌸