

The moon rose over the monastery, dripping silver light all along the flying roofs, trees and even on the garden stones Chen was walking along. He couldn't sleep, so he meandered through the garden, looked up at the moon and remembered his breath coming in and going out. His mind knew all the reasons why such excitement was trite; his life would only return to simplicity after the ceremony was over, but he couldn't help but feel that being fully ordained from a novice to a true monk was the biggest event of his life. And there was still the last teaching with the abbot himself. Some said it was like a test. He had been warned that he would only be ordained if and when he fully understood the most important of lessons. He wasn't as worried about meeting the abbot, he'd always liked the old man, and Chen was a great student if anything. He knew he wouldn't have any trouble memorizing, reciting or understanding whatever was needed to impress the abbot. And yet, the whole transformation was in his nerves, moving with enough force to get him out of bed. The beautiful full moon and the neatly trimmed garden, stones, river and koi fish were quickly calming his body down to where his mind knew it should be. He knew none of this was important, knew that it was just another changing moment in a great and fluid ocean of experience, but knowing and being aren't always the same thing. "I guess that's why I'm a novice," he thought.

After the morning meditation and chant, Chen decided to eat his breakfast alone. He took it out into the garden. Dew glistened on the grass and the flowers and bushes vibrantly contrasted with the darkness the place had offered the night before. He couldn't stop the nervous feeling that was shaking his porridge, and didn't bother. He lifted his gaze to the horizon and allowed himself to draw in some of its beauty. A few minutes later and the summons came for him. He was asked to meet the abbot in his quarters.

Chen cleaned his bowl slowly and meandered through the monastery with slow determination. He remembered when he was first brought to the monastery as a boy. He had hated the whole idea and cried during the entire trip. He remembered looking out at the distant mountains from the back of the jouncing ox cart as his father rubbed his arms and spoke gently of the great fortune and honor he was bringing to his family. Not everyone was accepted into this monastery. Once a monk, the villagers thought, he would bring merit to all their households. His parent's reputation would be established and his younger sister would have a better marriage. He understood much more of this now, but the sting of parting with his mother and father still bristled inside him. None of that mattered. He wasn't here for them anymore, anyway. He wasn't nervous on behalf of the distant village,

lost in an emotional well that he drew from less and less each year, he was nervous because he wanted this more than anything.

The abbot was kind and gentle. His wrinkled flesh seemed to mirror his inner softness. He smiled and gestured for Chen to have a seat on one of the cushions that surrounded a knee-high table hewn from a boulder long before this abbot took up residence here. Chen sat down and put his palms together in greeting. He breathed deeply and looked at the abbot. The old man's smile slowly withdrew. He placed an old, worn clay kettle onto a charcoal stove to heat up water for tea. Placing his hands together on the table, he pursed his lips and looked Chen over for some time. The silence seemed to stretch outwards and pull apart the moments, allowing extra time to flow in. The old abbot cleared his throat, "Chen, when you have come to understand your final lesson, you will be ordained. It was this way for all the monks that went before you into silence. This ordination won't be a celebration, but a bridge over which you will pass. From now on your only words will be those that are chants of the spirit; your only thoughts of peace and depth—your very being will focus the serenity and teaching of the masters before you." He paused and smiled. Chen relaxed a bit and smiled back. "But first, you will need to understand the most important lesson you've learned until now. More important than the Precepts or the Noble Truths; more important than the ancient texts and all their commentaries." The abbot reached under his side of the table and pulled up a small wooden box. He flipped the latch and opened it. Inside, on a yellow cushion, there were some dark leaves. He gently picked them up and put them into the small teapot that rest before him. He raised the kettle from the stove and poured water into the pot. His movements had all the grace of the dancers Chen had seen as a child. The water seemed to stroke the leaves and the pot, raising banners of steam around in spirals just as the dancing women had. The abbot closed his eyes and flared his nostrils with a deep draught of air before pouring the golden liquor into two small cups. He placed one of these before Chen and gestured with his hand.

Chen looked down at the reddish-golden brew and watched the steam swirl off the surface, carrying the smell of blossoms upwards to his face. He inhaled the perfume and shut his eyes in pleasure. It was one of the best smells of his life. He sipped the gorgeous tea and enjoyed the sensations it caused in his mouth and throat. The tea seemed to pour upwards through his head in waves of energy. It was bliss. The abbot poured one more steeping and then relaxed his back into a straighter, more meditative posture. Chen followed suit and began meditating as

## *The Ordination*

he had been taught since he was a boy. First he focused on the space between his upper lip and nose, feeling the air as it passed in and out. Then he began to focus on the sensations in his body, the quieting thoughts in his mind and the peace that began to drift through him calming and slowing the world down. The tea seemed to amplify his meditation and resonate through his body in waves.

Over the course of a couple hours, the abbot poured steeping after steeping and the magical leaves never lost their darkness or flavor. But Chen had long ago left behind all the tastes and smells the tea had to offer, drifting on its current to deeper meditations than he had ever had before. Finally, when the gong for lunch rang throughout the monastery, the abbot looked up at Chen and raised an eyebrow in askance. Was this a question? A test? Should he describe what he had experienced? The confusion jolted him back to the present. The abbot's eyebrow slowly released its question and he smiled. He reached over and patted Chen on the shoulder. "Come back again tomorrow," he said. Had Chen failed? He put his hands together, bowed and left the room quietly. He was a bit shocked. What had just happened?

Chen spent the next day in contemplative si-<sup>24</sup>lence. Novices were technically allowed to speak, but he had lost all interest in chatting with the other hopefuls. He wondered if the abbot was somehow reading his mental state and judging his readiness for a life of devotion. Again he asked himself if he had failed. Perhaps the abbot was just asking him to be more mindful so that he could ask him a question. Chen meditated all night, without rest.

After breakfast the next day, the summons once again came. Once again the wizened old abbot put the kettle on the stove. This time Chen noticed more about the room than he had before: the warm wood smell of the charcoal stove, the golden crevices in the abbot's soft hands that spoke of kindness, the veins in the ancient stone table and the view of the garden out the small window. The abbot brought forth the leaves, made obsequious gestures to them once again and then set about brewing the tea just as he had the day before. The tea tasted richer today. Chen noticed many other flavors, smells and sensations than he had the day before. Beneath the flowery smell there were hints of loam and



25 earth. He also noticed the way the tea affected his breath after he had swallowed it; and as he slipped into a meditative state, more gracefully than the previous day, he also noticed the way the tea's energy flowed through his body upwards and downwards, leaving out the extremities.

The two sat for a few hours, this time beyond even the gong for lunch, which reverberated through Chen in an odd way. Finally, the abbot's smile had returned. It was the first notice he had taken of Chen. Unlike yesterday, there had been no greeting—just straight to the tea. Chen wondered if the question would come now, or if perhaps the abbot was gauging his meditation, his awareness, to see if he was fit to be a monk at this most prestigious of monasteries. He fumbled for an answer, looking at the abbot in quizzical embarrassment as the old, white eyebrow once again rose in a gesture of wonder. Chen obviously wasn't seeing what he was meant to do. The abbot was gentle though. He smiled and patted Chen on the sleeve, patiently asking him to return again the next morning.

This time, Chen spent the entire afternoon and evening in meditation. The tea had seemed to inspire an alertness in him. He stayed in the meditation hall, recognizing time only by the increasing shadows through the slit windows, the moonlight and then the bright rays of dawn. At sunrise he rose and strolled through the garden. He found, to his surprise, that the questions, ordinations and tests had all drifted away. It didn't matter after all. One didn't need a ceremony, a robe or even a monastery to live a life devoted to enlightenment. A simple forest hut would suffice. He even began to pack his bags and prepare for the journey mentally. He knew he would be no more or less comfortable by himself in a hut than here in the garden. During the past months he had already begun to withdraw more and more from the community of novices. He thought this had been because his studies were increasingly difficult, or because of the upcoming vow of silence, but he now realized that in a life of spirit none of that mattered, only his own meditation did. He vowed that today when he went to see the abbot he would make it the last trip. He wanted to just enjoy the powerful tea and the quiet it instilled. If he had to leave the next day, or if he was ordained, it was of no consequence really. He also knew that this was perhaps what had been expected of him all along.

When he arrived to the abbot's quarters he sat and observed his breath as the water heated up. When the abbot bowed to the tea leaves, Chen also did and mentally thanked them for helping him to understand all that he had come to realize through the past few days' meditations. Again, he found that he was able to experience much more of the tea this time. A stray thought passed through his head, wondering whether it was just a familiarity with the tea or an increased sensitivity. This time he noticed a slight bitterness in the aftertaste that

wasn't unpleasant at all. He also seemed to be aware of the entire room, every movement—every breath swelling his being until he could feel the water pouring over the leaves, their essential oils dispersing into the pot, cup and even his body.

After a few hours of tea drinking and quiet meditation Chen bowed to the abbot. There was no question or test, just tea between friends. The abbot smiled profusely. "Now you understand, my brother" Chen hadn't failed to notice the term reserved for fellow monks. "The scriptures, teachings and methods are all secondary to the life that lives them. Even this lesson, about being peace rather than thinking it—even this is not as important as the life and experience you live, the tea you drink, the water that prepares it and the gentle steam that unfurls from its liquor." The abbot paused and held Chen's hand gently. "Now you are truly ready to live such a life."

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