

THE HERBALIST HERMIT

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Another strong connection I made at KTD Monastery during my recent visit was with the "hermit" as folks call him. The hermit lives in a small (very small) retreat house behind the monastery. He has been there for many years and practices in seclusion most of the time. Oh yes, I have seen him walking around, but he has never spoken to me, that is, until the day before we were to drive back home to Michigan. And it happened this way.

I was sitting on one of the large wooden teak benches under what is called the "Gampopa Gateway." From those benches I can see the peaks of some nearby mountains with all the fog and clouds that surround them. It is lovely. I was just letting my mind rest after almost two weeks of being very busy.

A couple tourists came through the gateway, actually leaving, and stopped to ask me a few questions about the monastery. I did my best to fill them in and pointed out this or that spot they might want to visit. I ended up showing them to the doors of the main facility and they went inside.

Later, when I myself wandered in, there being not much to do since everything was over and almost everyone had left, I found these two folks talking with KTD co-director Linda Patrik. She was explaining more to them about the place. And like a tag team, I picked these two visitors up from Linda and gave them a mini-tour, ending in the dining area. And that's when I saw him. There was the hermit standing at the very back of this large room. Later I was told that he had now finished more than a decade of private retreat and was out and about a bit.

The two visiting folks, wide-eyed as they were, soon struck up a conversation with the hermit and, low-and-behold, he answered them. And there I stood at the fringe of this conversation taking this all in. Well, pretty soon the woman visitor announced that she was Ukrainian and a descendant of parents who had been in a gulag. Well, this sparked the hermit who announced that he too was Ukrainian and had actually survived a gulag. He was now 86 years old, but looked like sixty-ish or so, healthy and hearty.

Before I knew it, I had kind of joined the conversation and suddenly he and I were eyeball-to-eyeball talking with one another. We soon established that we had met the great siddha Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche about the same time as well as the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa. It was clear that we pretty much saw things the same way.

Soon we were deep in conversation and it was evident to me that we had a strong natural connection. My eyes were locked to his. He reminded me of my first dharma teacher Andrew McIver, a Scotsman who was 82 when he passed on. I could feel the transmission happening because I was listening (and not talking much) and just taking all of this in. There was something internal happening here.

And then (to my fascination) the hermit soon was leading Margaret and me out to his retreat house, which I had only seen from the outside, but had never entered. It was always carefully fenced and closed to visitors. He showed us his very humble place, not much more than a table and a cot to sleep on. He has very little in this world.

One thing he did have were jars and jars of herbs, organic remedies and natural medicines. They lined the shelves and walls of his tiny place. Pretty soon I was telling him about my sinus problems and he was pointing out natural remedies that he had learned himself and used for sinuses, one of them being ground Calamus root powder ("Sweet Flag"). Another was Colloidal Silver, something he made there himself. I then related to him that many years before, when I was considering becoming an herbalist myself, I had gathered Calamus root along the banks of the Huron River in Ann Arbor Michigan and had dried and candied it. The hermit was amazed that I even knew what the herb was. As I mentioned earlier, there was a connection here.

Soon I was writing down recipes and then I was snorting some Calamus powder and so it went. The hermit, whose name was also Michael (Mychajlo) made the two of us some dandelion tea, pouring mine in a cup and his into a little glass jar (he did not have another free cup). We clinked cups and celebrated finding one another in this very wide world. We will stay in touch, and I will learn more about herbs.

Michael (the hermit) cured his serious case of colon cancer (five large tumors) with his own herbs and is today remarkably healthy and cancer-free. In this world of medical weakness, just connecting with such a spirit is revitalizing. One book that he has and considers invaluable is still available, "The Yoga of Herbs: An Ayurvedic Guide to Herbal Medicine" by Dr. David Frawley and Dr. Vasant Lad.

Perhaps the main transmission I received is the idea that we can and must make attempts to cure ourselves and not be so passive about medicine.

[Here is a photo of Mychajlo Urbhan (the hermit) making an offering to Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche at this recent intensive.]



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