

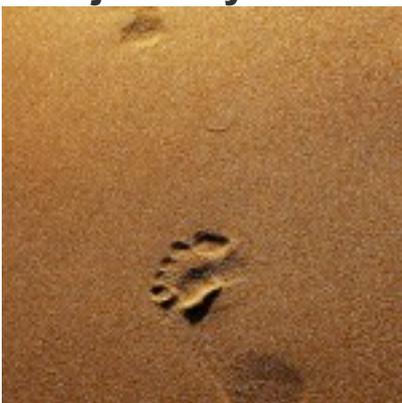
The Roots of War Within



Interview with Claude AnShin Thomas conducted by Vlad Moskovski

I first met Claude AnShin Thomas at a talk that he gave, and the first thing that struck me about him was his straightforward honesty. There was something very sharp and clear about his talk, his attitude, and his vision. I am honored to have the chance to interview Claude AnShin, who has experienced so much in his life. He has been many things. A combat soldier in Vietnam, martial arts teacher, musician, political activist, peace advocate, and ascetic wandering monk.

Vlad: You have walked many miles on foot, what is the longest continuous journey you have done on foot and what inspired this journey?



The longest continuous journey I would have to say was from the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland to Vietnam. I was ordained in Auschwitz, a decision made by my teacher. In preparation for that ordination, I sat in the selection site between two railroad tracks in Auschwitz/Birkenau. I fasted there for four days, no food or water, and I chanted from sunup to sundown.

I then walked to Vietnam, through something like 25 or 27 countries. Most of the places I walked through were places of current or past fighting. The experience of being a combat soldier has shaped the way my Zen Buddhist practice has developed. It has helped me come into a more conscious relationship with the sources of conflict that are within me. It has also given me a greater insight into the reality of separation that exists amongst those who call themselves peace advocates. A lot of these people see the soldiers as the enemy. I realized through my own experience that people seldom pay attention to the suffering of the perpetrator. However, if we observe carefully, we can see that within each victim there is a perpetrator and within each perpetrator there is a victim.

Vlad: What was it like to be walking through these countries on foot?

That was a long time ago. I can only say now in hindsight that it was incredibly important, and intensely powerful in the sense that it got me into a more intimate connection with how I was affected by my military service. It brought into a sharper focus the full spectrum of the experience of war: the war before the war, the war itself, and the war after the war. It refined my understanding that War is not a finite experience.

The pilgrimage helped me understand the experience in a more certain and clear way. It made me realize clearly that I don't have any enemies. The whole notion of enemy is a fabrication. The demonization of the other helped to absolve the roots of war in me. If I want to be an advocate of active non-violence, I have to be awake to the sense of war in me, to the soldier in me. I have to be able to embrace the reality of my duality, understanding that I don't know the specific experience of an Iraqor Iranian soldier, or a Chilean soldier. I don't know their exact experience, but I do know that I am not different from them. I try not to focus on precise experience, which can create a sense of separation, but rather to see where am I connected, where it is that our experiences intersect.



Vlad: If I understand correctly, you don't have a permanent home, is this part of your spiritual practice? How did that come about?

Somehow, from the very beginning, it just made sense to me and I did not know why. I feel the critical importance of living a very direct life. Everything that I have read and studied talks about the importance of renunciation through the maturation of spiritual practice, of not being rooted in fame or gain. I want nothing more than to wake up. I want to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. My life is committed to that, because of all the consequences to living in forgetfulness.

My vows – no home, no resources, no saving, no insurance, none of the trappings of security bring more sharply into focus the reality that these sorts of things do not provide security. I am often invited to teach meditation or to work with cultures of violence in support of a desired transformation out of this cycle. The invitations come from all over the world. I do not charge for my services. I do everything for free, but if people want me there, they have to get me there and I don't fly business class or first class. You chuckle at that, but I can't tell you how many Buddhist teachers I know who won't travel any other way than business class or first class.

Vlad: Would you recommend this wandering lifestyle to others who may want to follow in your footsteps?



I think this way of living is the best way in the world. Now, would I recommend this to others? Not my job. People need to find their own way. People have the sense somehow that it is a glamorous life and it is not.

Let's say somebody embarks on this path. They need to be fully committed to it, because they have no real sense of its' demands. I had ideas of what this might be like, but in truth there is no way that I could ever know what this lifestyle is like. That is the wonder of it. It just keeps revealing itself day by day, year by year. I suppose I will live like this until I don't live. I hear monks and priests talking about retirement, and I go, "are you kidding me?" To be a monk is not a job, this is a life commitment. You don't retire from this.



Vlad: For many years you have, and still do, live with post traumatic stress, how has meditation and Zen practice affected that?

Living the life of spiritual development has taught me to live in a more conscious relation with myself. That being said, the 4th noble truth tells us that the cure for suffering does not entail the elimination of suffering. It does not mean that suffering goes away. Not in my experience. In my experience it means that I learn to live in a different relationship with my suffering. As a result my suffering

does not haunt me in the ways that it did when I was attempting to eliminate this suffering.

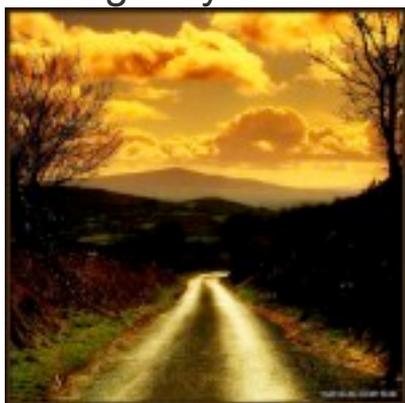
I have not slept for more than 2 hours consecutively since 1967. I still don't. When I was wrapped up in the notion that I had to get my life to conform to certain standards, I was in a place of non-acceptance. Through spiritual practice I was catapulted into a place of awareness and acceptance of my life as it was. I am then encouraged to take responsibility, not pretend that I am someone I'm not, or that there is some fixed way to be in the world.

I think there is a false impression marketed in regards to the issue of feelings and transformation on the spiritual path. Ideas are sold that healing is the absence of suffering, that it means everything goes away and becomes like it always was or is supposed to be. When in reality, there is no supposed to be. There is no fixed place where we can stand firm except in the reality of not knowing, in the reality of impermanence.

Spiritual practice is not an intellectual matter. I can't think myself into a new way of living. I have to live myself into a new way of thinking.

Vlad: What advice, if any, do you have for vets?

First let me say that I am not in the advice giving business. What I pass along to Veterans is what I have learned and experienced through my own life. That healing is not the



absence of suffering, it is learning to live in a more conscious relationship with how we have been affected. How we react and respond to the world makes absolute sense based on the nature of our experiences. We can't ever go back to who we were before our military service, and the very nature of our experiences in war can't be changed. I pass along the message that healing is possible, if

one is willing to give up ideas of what that means. The very heart of healing rests with the acceptance that this is like this because that was like that. I think acceptance grows out of the desire to accept. But it must be supported by disciplined spiritual practice.

What I talk about often is the roots of war that are within us. I think the majority of people never consider this reality. It is something foreign to them. I think it is incredibly important to understand that the non-veteran is more responsible for war than the veteran.

Because they think they are not responsible. People look to the violence that is external to them, and never reflect on the roots of that violence within them. We must pick up the roots of war within us and commit our lives to the transformation of this violence.

The world is constantly communicating to me, but if I am so set on the answer that I want to hear or what I think I should be hearing, then I lose my capacity to hear. Understanding is not the accumulation of information, but rather how that information manifests itself in real life terms in my life. It is a two-fold process, of asking the question, and being able to listen to the answer.