

Red Pine

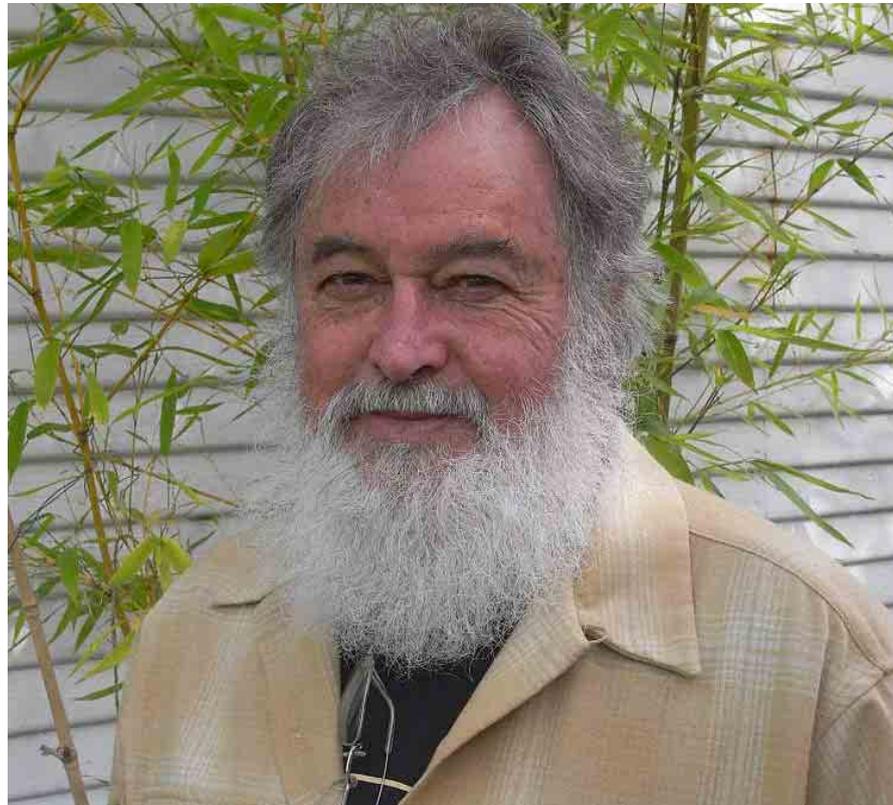
The American translator of Buddhist texts and poetry, also known as Bill Porter, talks bank robberies and meditation with **Clare Morin**.

MY LIFE

STEALTH TO WEALTH I was born in Los Angeles in 1943. My father grew up in Arkansas on a cotton farm. When he was young, he and a bunch of cousins decided to upgrade their lifestyle by robbing banks. They worked their way up the Mississippi towards Michigan before the police got word of the next job. They laid in wait and killed everybody except my father. He went to prison. His family sold the farm and moved to Detroit to be close to my Dad. The two daughters, my aunts, got jobs waiting tables at The Cadillac Hotel Restaurant, which happened to be where the governor ate. After six years, he pardoned my father. By the time I was born, my father had 52 hotels and was a multimillionaire. I grew up in luxury with servants and maids and all kinds of people.

STATE OF ENLIGHTENMENT I read a book about Zen Buddhism by Alan Watts called *The Way of Zen* and thought, "This makes wonderful sense; it's so reasonable." I wanted to learn more about it, so on a form for a language fellowship, I checked off the word "Chinese". I went to Columbia (University) for a couple of years and started learning Chinese, but then I met a Chinese monk in Chinatown who taught me to meditate. I used to join him on the weekends and I thought, "This is what I would really love to do." After two years, I quit Columbia, gave them back the fellowship and, in 1972, I went to Taiwan to live in a monastery.

THE HIGH LIFE I lived in Fo Guang Shan for a year but there were too many people so I spent the next 2½ years at a smaller monastery outside of Taipei, in the mountains. Obviously, in a monastery you meditate and perform some ceremonies, but I had all this time on my hands so I started reading a lot and trying to improve my Chinese by translating. The abbot published the poems in Chinese of a famous Buddhist poet called Cold Mountain, or Hanshan, the man to whom Jack Kerouac dedicated his book *The Dharma Bums*. I happened to be in the



middle of translating the poems when I left the monastery and moved to a farming village outside Taipei up on a mountain. I rented a farmhouse called Zhuzihu, or Bamboo Lake, where I lived for 14 years. I translated and eventually published the poetry of Cold Mountain but, when I got married, I had to get a real job, at a local English-language radio station.

THE DANCE OF TRANSLATING I tell people, it's like dancing. I see this beautiful woman on the dance floor and I want to move with her. I can't dance with my feet on top of her feet and I can't dance across the room; I've got to get close. It's like this woman is dancing to music I can't hear and I am deaf. I've got to get close to the dancer so I can feel the energy of the dance. I have come to realise that what we consider the original text is, in fact, not the original text. The original text is the music; it's what is making that dancer dance. Translation is a seductive art.

ROAD TO CHINA While translating the poetry of Hanshan, I wondered whether

there really were people who still lived a reclusive life meditating in the mountains. So I decided to go to China to look for hermits. I applied to the Guggenheim Foundation, but before I got the results I had an interview with the son of the wealthiest man in Taiwan. His name was Winston Wong Wen-Young and he was at Formosa Plastics, one of the world's largest plastics company. At the end of the interview, I said, "Did you ever see the movie *The Graduate*?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "So, what would you tell a young person? Would you tell them, 'Plastic son, plastic?'" And he said, "No, I would tell them to follow the Tao." I was so impressed with him. I said, "You know, that's amazing, that's what I'm interested in. In fact, this is probably my last interview because next week I should be hearing from the Guggenheim Foundation about going to China to look for hermits." He said, "That's a great idea. If they don't give you the money, I will." And, of course, they didn't and he didn't, so I had to fund the project myself. I took a year-and-a-half off to write this book, *Road to Heaven*.

RADIO ACTIVE My old radio-station boss in Taiwan, Bryan Curtis, was invited to Hong Kong to become head of a new radio station, Metro News, and asked me to join him. He said, "All you have to do is give us two minutes of fluff a day." I travelled along the Yellow River and produced *Yellow River Odyssey*, which was popular in Hong Kong (the book of the same name is a rewriting of the radio scripts from 1991). I go from the mouth to the source. It was so successful they asked me to travel along the Silk Road to Pakistan. I visited the hill tribes down in the southwest and travelled around China. After two years, I had saved enough money so we could move back to America with our kids.

RISING DRAGON About five years ago, I met a publisher who wanted to publish my books in China. They started translating my books into Chinese, even the books that I had translated from Chinese - like *The Heart Sutra* and *The Diamond Sutra* - they translated back into Chinese with my commentaries. Now when I go to China, people recognise me on the street. There's a great hunger in the Chinese for rediscovering their own culture. That's what I've always been interested in, their traditional culture. I can't speak of modern politics because I have no interest in it. I learned long ago that the closer you get to the dragon's mouth, the more dangerous your life is.

LAST WORDS I don't want to have a deadline anymore, so I'm going to stop writing. I never meant to write in the first place, it was just a way of translating some Hanshan poems to improve my Chinese. I want to go back to that moment where I was first in the monastery, translating those poems, and wonder what else could I have done? What else could I do? Maybe it's just a matter of more gardening, longer walks, longer naps. But I think I'd like to travel more. I have friends in other places. Now I'm getting into my 70s, the people I have known are beginning to die. So I'm thinking now would be a good time to say hello, before we have to say goodbye.

Yellow River Odyssey by Bill Porter (Chin Music Press) will be published on May 3.