

When Christianity & Buddhism meet

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Dear Sister Linda Julian,

Several times toward the end of Zen retreats we have made together, you have asked, "But what does my Christianity add to my Buddhism?" And the answer you received was, "Nothing. It's all going the other way right now."

I understand that skepticism about Christianity's "adding" to Buddhism. Both of us know many fellow-Christians who are drawn to Buddhist practice, either because of an alienation from the church, or, as I believe is true for ourselves, because we find in the zendo something we believe we cannot find in the church.

I would not call myself a "Buddhist"; even "Buddhist-Christian" has its difficulties. Although Thich Nhat Hanh has statues of Buddha and Jesus on his altar, the Dalai Lama has said that mixing Buddhism and Christianity is like "trying to put a yak's head on a cow's body." Even Thomas Merton, who did so much to foster Buddhist-Christian dialogue, says in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* that "studied as structures, as systems and religions, Zen and Catholicism don't mix any better than oil and water."

Despite these and other cautions, I believe that my efforts at Buddhist practice, and my reading in Buddhist literature, have subtly and significantly influenced my Christian faith--and, I would say, for the better. In moving from church to zendo and back again, I know that I have been able to respond more and more "heartily" to the gospel. It is not that I have set up a parallel religious practice (no statues of Jesus and Buddha side by side on my altar--no statues at all, come to think of it), but in "Buddhist" practice I have somehow come home in a new way to my Christian

faith.

What I have found in the zendo is a deeper silence than I expect to find in the church, at least in my lifetime.

As you know, for Buddhists, especially in the Zen tradition, the first step in "just sitting" is to let go of all "views," that is, quietly but firmly to set aside all spontaneous and not-so-spontaneous discriminating judgments of right and wrong, good and bad--all judgments whatsoever, even those which might make up "Buddhism." (This, I think, is the basic meaning of the notorious Buddhist dictum, "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.") I would not say that this "emptying of the mind" is the essence of Buddhism, but Thich Nhat Hanh would certainly put as the first step for the mindfulness practice which is at the heart of Zen living.

As our own Empty Hand Zendo (zen community) manual describes it, "Seated meditation is the core of our practice. This involves working with the body, breath, and mind, entering into deep silence and stillness, and opening to a fresh awareness moment after moment." In short, no "views" to be clung to here!

It is this silence that many of us, including practicing Christians, have experienced as a "coming home." On one level, having set aside so much of our usual busyness, one might say that we have come home just to ourselves, or to what some folks would call our "center." That is certainly true, but in the Buddhist tradition I think it would be more accurate to say that we seek to become "decentered," less concerned with ourselves and with the judgments, convictions, illusions, and prejudices that we so often use to prop up those "selves."

Raimondo Panikkar titled his major study of Buddhism *The Silence of God: The Answer of the Buddha* (Orbis), and one of the things the Buddha was most

silent about was "God." I think the Buddha has something to teach us on that point. I was introduced at an early age into the tradition of "negative theology," which stresses the limits, or even the breakdown, of all our concepts of God. And it is still a very important part of my religious outlook. If anything, I have become over time more convinced that our ecclesial talkativeness, and especially our all-too-facile "God-talk," can become a real obstacle to personal faith. (No one can say that we haven't been cautioned about the dangers of talkativeness. As early as the third century, Origen warned that "to say even true things about God involves no small risk," and Henri de Lubac emphasized that risk again.

Even earlier, Ignatius of Antioch described God as "the silence out of which the word comes forth." When Karl Rahner began speaking of God as "Mystery," he was urging us to be more cautious. And yet we keep talking about "God" with unseemly ease. No wonder T. S. Eliot protested in "Ash Wednesday" that there is not enough silence for the word to be heard.)

I would not say that one has to go to a Buddhist zendo to recover an appropriate religious silence, nor would I say that all the changes that have taken place in my faith are the result of "just sitting." But, in fact, the Buddhists are better at this religious silence than we Christians. Regularly going into this silence has made my faith freer, more exploratory, and more personal. I have become more of a "listener" to our own tradition, somehow more receptive to it and surely less defensive about it.

What I have come to listen to in this way is, quite simply, "the Christian story." More and more I have come to think of Christian faith not primarily as a creed or as a mystical journey but as responsibility for a story: the story of "God," with all its ins and outs, even as Jack Miles has most recently retold it in *God: A Biography* (Knopf), and the story of Jesus, in all its New Testament versions, even as deconstructed by John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg. It is a very old story. It has been told again and again--at Nicaea and Chalcedon; by Athanasius and Augustine and Aquinas; by Eckhart and Ignatius and Newman. I like some versions better than others, but I respect all the versions, even as I realize I must take responsibility for my own deconstruction and retelling of the story. In all the reflective writing Thomas Merton has done on Buddhism (especially Zen) and Christianity, the recurring line is, "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me." The "story," God help us, is now incarnate in me. Or so Saint Paul claims, and I'm willing to test it out with him.

Even as I describe a faith still in progress, I also find myself in agreement with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's scolding 1989 letter on "Some Aspects of Christian Meditation." I don't see the dangers of Eastern mysticism that worry the congregation, but I do see that the words of Scripture are the bearers of the Christian story and the sacraments are the dramatic reenactment of the continuing story. If you let Scripture, liturgy, and sacraments go and try to "disappear into the sea of the Absolute," as the congregation worries, you may still be part of some story but not any longer the Christian one. So I find that even as I get deeper into Buddhist practice, Scripture study, the liturgy, and especially the Eucharist become not less but more important to me. That's exactly what

I listen to and somehow "hear" in a new way across the silence.

In trying to hold Scripture, sacraments, and Buddhist silence together, I have found the writings of John P. Keenan, a Buddhist scholar and an Episcopal priest, very helpful. He has shown how, in at least one Buddhist framework, the Mahayana (the mystical "Great Vehicle" tradition of Indian Buddhism, of which Zen is in a special way "the meditation school"), it might be possible to read Christology ("the Word") in a way that respects "the silence" about which Ignatius of Antioch speaks. Keenan has proposed that reading the Christian tradition through a Buddhist lens will enable theologians to locate the doctrine of the Incarnation in the context of God's ultimate "unknowability"--the divine darkness--which is also part of the authentic Christian mystical tradition (*The Meaning of Christ: A Mahayana Theology*, Orbis; and *The Gospel of Mark: A Mahayana Reading*, Orbis).

Keenan makes use of two themes: the identity between "emptiness" and "dependent co-arising" and the "differentiation between the two truths of ultimate meaning and worldly convention." The first of these themes applies "horizontally" to our being in the world and says that nothing we experience in our ordinary lives has a reality independent of the fragile network of "causes and conditions" that bring our experienced realities about. The second theme is "vertical" and "attempts to clarify our experience of transcendence and its enunciation in symbols and languages" (see, *The Anglican Theological Review*, 1989).

Given the longstanding Christian effort to ground all things in God ("the ground of being," Tillich has taught us to say) and our commitment to "the analogy of being," it is difficult to see how Buddhist "emptiness" does not lead to nihilism and despair, since for the Mahayana Buddhist there is none of the metaphysical security that has become so much a part of the Christian theological tradition.

In fact, however, the notion that all things are "empty" leads the Buddhist not to nihilism and despair but to nonattachment, and from there to freedom and compassionate reengagement in the world. Nor does the Buddhist sense of the lack of essential reality in the things of our experience mean that there is nothing to be understood about the world. On the contrary, these two themes affirm both the ultimate truth of "emptiness" and the "conventional" validity of the knowledge we acquire in the world of "dependent co-arising." The knowledge we have, Buddhists believe, is partial and minimal but still vitally important as the "skillful means" by

which we reach toward the ultimate, ever unspoken truth of emptiness and the freedom of compassionate re-engagement in the world.

These notions crucially modify the prevailing Christian understanding of doctrine and even of revelation, understood as "information." As Keenan says, "The role of doctrine in Mahayana theology is not to communicate a body of information about God, but to engender a sense of the presence of God beyond all words. All proclaimed knowledge of God is parable, not entailing acceptance of a given state of affairs in the Godhead but eliciting conversions in the minds of the hearers."

Given the tension between our experience of transcendence and our worldly experience, it is no accident that Keenan chooses to reflect on the Gospel of Mark in light of a Mahayana reading. Mark's Gospel is the least obviously "supernatural" of the Gospels--no virgin birth and, in its original form, probably no Resurrection appearances. And although Keenan has read the Gospel against the background of all the available Markan literature, he has a clear bias toward the more radical critics.

But if Keenan simply read Mark's Gospel in a radical way, he would not add much to what John Dominic Crossan and others have already proposed. The Mahayana Jesus who comes through the commentary is certainly not a "divine man" (as he ought not be for Christian orthodoxy!) and certainly not a mythological figure. Yet it would be a mistake to think that, for Keenan, Jesus is "only human," since in the Mahayana framework in which there are no essences it does not make sense to speak of either a divine or a human essence or "nature." As "dependently co-arisen," Keenan's Jesus is the product of his own history and of the history of Israel, just as the New Testament is the "dependently co-arisen" product of the early Christian community. In this Mahayana Buddhist framework, it doesn't really make sense to speak of "divinity" at all. But if we want to honor the experience that led theologians to speak of "the divinity of Christ," we will say that it is Jesus' total emptiness of self which makes him nothing but sacramental sign of the ever unseen Father--nothing but "the word which comes forth from the silence."

If we want to go further on a Buddhist-Christian way, Keenan's Mahayana theology may well serve as a starting point (though I suspect his conceptual framework will cause more problems to metaphysically inclined theologians than to the average devout Christian). And, of course, from any Christian standpoint, it is not enough to read just one of the Gospels. Mark's Gospel has its own special significance and its integrity needs to

be maintained, but it has to be brought into dialogue (and dialectic) with the other three Gospels, with Paul, and the rest of the New Testament--Keenan does deal with the whole New Testament in his systematic work. In the end, we may even find that there is more salvific value to traditional (if deconstructed) Christian metaphysics than a Buddhist reading allows.

Even with these cautions, I think Keenan has given us a valuable starting point. If I were to contrast his work with Thich Nhat Hanh's *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (Putnam), for example, I would say that for Thich Nhat Hanh it would not matter if the historical Jesus had not lived, as long as the teachings of Jesus were kept alive. (In fairness, I think Thich Nhat Hanh would say the same thing about the historical Buddha.) For Keenan, on the other hand, Jesus' life, death, and Resurrection, proclaimed in the Gospels, and continued in us, is the teaching. The "story" is vitally important and cannot be dispensed with in favor of a body of spiritual teaching. Indeed, Keenan has said explicitly that the point of his writing a gospel commentary was to maintain the historicity of the Christian tradition.

There are many questions I would want to address to Keenan, not the least of them concerning the experience of transcendence which at first look seems so different in the Buddhist and Christian traditions. Reviewers have called his work "intriguing," "courageous," and "challenging." It is certainly groundbreaking, and, given his resistance to absolute statement, I am sure he would not ask that it be given a value beyond "worldly convention."

But most of all, I think it shows that it will be a while before we can give a good answer to your question of "what Christianity adds to Buddhism." Quick dogmatic answers will probably miss the intention of Buddhist critiques of religion and will not advance the dialogue, now just really beginning, between these two rich and complex religious traditions. In the meantime, let us continue to practice mindfully, attentive to the story in which we live, humbly aware of our own limits but also of the Mystery that we have barely glimpsed.

In Christ Jesus,
Jack Healey