

Dying to the self:

The core of Christian and Zen practice

(This exchange of letters was sent to us by Rev. Rusty Hicks, a Christian minister and Senior Dharma teacher in the Kwan Um Zen School. A long-term student of Soen Sa Nim, Rusty is Abbot of the New Haven Zen Center and Director of the Urban Ministry for the Greater Bridgeport, CN Council of Churches.)

June 24, 1984

Dear Rusty,

My name is Peter. I was a member of the Providence sangha before I moved to California. Now I am rather inactive, due to graduate school.

I have heard that you are a Dharma Teacher and a Christian minister. Perhaps you can help me. There is a conflict in my heart about Buddhism and Christianity operating simultaneously within the same person or family (my fiancée is a Christian, and I support her 100% for I truly believe that is her Way.)

The problem is not with Zen, for we are taught, "The Dharmas are boundless-I vow to master them;" this includes the teachings of Jesus Christ, presumably. The problem is with Jesus' declaration, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Light, and no one comes to the Father but through me." One can see this as equivalent to Buddha's "In Heaven above and Earth below, only I am holy." To me that means, in both statements, "What is perceived purely, clearly, that is 'Big I.' 'Big I' is holy, and realizing 'Big I' is salvation."

I understand Jesus' miracles and Resurrection as 270° on the [Zen] teaching circle, and His death as "putting it all down." I know that He loves me and that He wants me to find my correct Path...I want Him in my life to guide me and teach me, but I also have learned so much from Zen. I am sure that he would understand me, does understand me, but unfortunately most contemporary Christians do not. Some that I have met see Zen as heathen or even Satanic; especially when I told this one fellow about the Five Precious ceremony and the fire ritual. This hurts me deeply.

I am at a loss as to what to do. I have even considered giving up Zen and becoming 100% Christian, so as to participate fully in Christian worship with my wife-to-be, and to raise our children in a non-contradictory framework. I would be most grateful if you could offer any suggestions on our inter-faith problems.

I hope that your life is blessed, and that things are turning up roses for you. Hope to hear from you soon.

Yours in all Dharmas,

Peter

August 5, 1984

Dear Peter,

Hello. I am very sorry to be returning your letter so late. My only excuse is that I have been very busy.

You wrote me about the conflict you feel your relation to your Zen practice and Christianity. I can surely understand that dilemma; I live with it every day. Let me just explain briefly how I have dealt with the apparent conflict, and you can decide how it sounds to you. Ultimately, you and your wife will have to make your own decisions about your future religious path and that of your children.

My own feeling is that Christianity is highly compatible to Zen practice. First let me define Zen as primarily practice, not belief. In some ways it is like jogging or weightlifting, or any other form of discipline. It is just clearing the mind to perceive what is. It is an intimate relation with the truth, what is right in front of us. It is really very clear; it carries no taint and cannot really be seen as a religious system or set of beliefs.

In this light I find it resonates strongly with Jesus in the gospels. Jesus throughout his ministry was protesting against the legalism and overintellectualism of the religious

authorities of his day. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were constantly living according to their predetermined laws and opinions: you can do nothing on the Sabbath (including healing), you cannot eat with taxcollectors and prostitutes, you have to wash your hands before eating...and all of these petty rules by which they judged whether Christ was holy. They missed the point, because they could not see the reality of Christ's power and love. Jesus points to an intimate relation to God; he calls God 'Abba' which means 'daddy.' His was a direct relation to the truth.

In his teaching Jesus also emphasises an attitude of watchfulness and wakefulness, very similar to Zen practice which calls for one being fully awake, completely mindful. Mark 13:32-37 is a great example of this.

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"Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house will come. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch."

My understanding of this passage is that it speaks of the kind of prayer Jesus calls us to develop. It is similar to the form of contemplative prayer that has been used in Christian monasteries for centuries. This form of prayer is usually nonverbal, it is based on waiting for the presence of God. I just learned recently that a prayer that St. Francis used as his basic practice was asking the question, "What am I, Lord. And who are You?" Since the time of the Desert Fathers, back in the fourth century A.D. a common practice was asking the question, "What am I?" My sense is that these folk were striving to find

the real presence of God and not just an idea. I myself am not content to believe that God is just an idea. If God is not rooted in reality, then is this really God?

I realize I am mixing a bunch of ideas up here. But my basic feeling is that Christians

I guess I basically feel that the essential direction of each religion is extremely similar. The core teaching, to my mind, of Christianity is that Christ died to save all people, and for this reason rose again to be with God. Christians are also called to do

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often tend to be really stuck on beliefs, on ideas. Zen only points to reality itself. God has to be reality. What else can God be? And Zen only uses silence. Is silence Christian or Buddhist? Is a tree Christian or Buddhist? Is your true self, or the essence of God or the universe Christian or Buddhist or whatever. God is only God. God claims in Exodus, chapter 3, that God's true name is "I am What I Am." That to my mind is a wonderful explanation of the vanity of so much talk and so

just that, as well. "And he said to all, If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23) St. Paul also explains that Baptism is the experience of dying to your old self and being reborn anew in God. In Zen practice we hear over and over again the notion of putting it all down, let go of small self, become true self. Dying to self is a very basic notion in both Christian and Zen practice throughout the centuries.

In terms of the notion that Jesus says, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Light. No one comes to the Father but through me," I have to believe that there is a broader interpretation. Jesus shows over and over again that he does not give in to prejudice and narrowness. He does not go only to the Jews, but to all varieties of people, including sinners. My own interpretation is that no one comes to God except by the way of selflessness, by way of the cross. But this does not exclude other forms.

My own feeling is that Christian exclusivity is derived from the Jewish roots. My feeling is that this is more a tribal notion, than anything that needs to be written for all eternity. We now live in a very small world. I have a hard time imagining that God or the universe would be so narrow as to only give one way that came from only one tribe.

My sense is that Zen and Buddhism have a great deal to offer to Christianity, and visa versa. Arnold Toynbee, the historian, felt that Western Civilization would be saved by the union of Christianity and Buddhism. What Zen has to offer is a method for **doing** what so many Christians talk about. It is a way to get beyond all the rhetoric, to get to the simple and straightforward truths of the faith. The danger that Christianity faces in modern times is being discredited because it is so caught up in words and dogma that it does not pay enough attention to daily life, to going deeply into the essence of reality and finding God there. Christians are often threatened by science, but do not have to be at all. But they are threatened because of the separation between belief and facing the real world directly.

Anyway, I feel that the dialogue, or the introduction of Zen into Christianity is extremely healthy. It causes us to be less dependent on beliefs and words, and more confident in the truth of the teaching in every moment of our lives.

I hope that some of this rambling was helpful. As you can see, I have been thinking a lot about this, though I feel I have much more to learn. It is exciting to be part of the dialogue.

Basically, I just trust practicing, whether it is Christian prayer or Zen meditation. This world is so screwed up that any form of sincere religious effort in my mind is great. So keep up the work!

Take care. In all the Dharmas,

Rusty Hicks



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