

The Mustard Seed

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(Editor's note: The author draws from the Gospel of Thomas, a Gnostic Christian text dating to the first few centuries A.D. Since their discovery in Egypt in 1945, the "Gnostic Gospels" have inspired a renewed exploration of Jesus' person and message. Although not considered authoritative by Christian churches, these texts continue to gain in influence both within and beyond Christianity.)

Adapted from a talk at a Christian-Buddhist conference at Providence Zen Center in October, 1990.

In Christianity and Buddhism, the heart of true meditation is to be intimate with your own experience. One of the inspiring things in the lives of Jesus and Buddha is their innocence, their questioning. They had examples and teachers, but ultimately each went off on his own.

There are some quotes from Jesus that I find particularly relevant. One is, "If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you." One of the first things Zen Master Seung Sahn taught me to do was to ask, "What am I?" Suppose you were sitting at Jesus' knee two thousand years ago, and he said that about "bringing forth that which is within you." And then he didn't say any more, he just walked away. Those would be your instructions. Over time, maybe you would begin to ask, naturally, what it is within you that could save you? What is that?

In our school, we have three month retreats in the winter called Kyol Che, "tight dharma." We repeat and repeat and repeat the same schedule every day, in silence. There are about ten hours of just gazing at the floor in silence. Every day there's a work period, every day there's breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The repetition is so that our mind can rest a little and ask, "What am I?," or "What is within me that is going to save me? How can I find that?" There's a tremendous gift in that repetition.

It doesn't take too much life experience to realize that we could use a little saving; that there is discomfort, disease, sadness, selfishness. Religion gives us qualities to aspire to, such as generosity, patience, and forbearance.

There are mantras and phrases used in Buddhism, as with ejaculatory prayer in Christianity, that replace a discriminating mind—a mind that has preferences and aversions and attractions which are out of balance—with just that prayer, that repetition. Just as a child will touch something hot out of ignorance and burn her hand, so adults will touch hot subjects—or objects that we're attached to—and get into trouble. If we repeat the phrase or prayer, we replace what hurts with a mind that is

steady, clear, open, and present.

Jesus talked about the mustard seed, "the tiniest of all seeds. But when it falls on prepared soil, it grows into a large plant and shelters the birds of the sky." The mustard seed has been used metaphorically in Buddhism, too. Our mind is the same. Sometimes our Buddha-nature, our God-nature, our ability to see clearly is very, very tiny. We have bad days. We have bad lives, some of us! So you start right now. You don't think of yourself as being bad or good or proficient or clumsy. Simply regard yourself as having that seed.

Prepared soil is very important. With a casual lifestyle, it's difficult to attain your true self completely. But it's also said, "in sterile water, fish cannot live." If the water is too clean, there will be nothing to eat. Each of us has to find the "middle way" for ourselves. We have to find the relationship with this world that will work for us. It can't be too loose or too tight.

I lived at Providence Zen Center for seventeen years. Every morning, the wake-up bell would remind me, "It's time to practice." The Buddha taught that food, sex, sleep, fame, and wealth are especially sticky. They keep you in bed in the morning; you're exhausted from not being in a balanced relationship with one or another of them. The bell helps you stay in balance. You've gotten up early, so you have that time to ask, "What is it within me that can save me, keep me out of that stickiness?"

Those five sticky things are inherently neither good nor bad; it's our relationship to them that matters. Zen Master Seung Sahn says, "Why do that—for what and for whom?" That can be one of our ejaculatory prayers, one of our questions. If you wake up, then it's, "For what and for whom? What am I doing just now?"

Prayer and contemplation don't stop in the monastery or Zen center. If taught and practiced sincerely, they're totally portable. As a visiting hospice nurse, I'm exposed to endless opportunities to wake up to life situations, to incorporate meditation into my nursing practice. Many of the patients I work with personify what goes on with all of us. We get despondent, we feel like giving up, we can be self-destructive.

Many of my patients have a history of severe drug abuse. Shoving heroin up your veins is overtly self-destructive. Sometimes it's very challenging to be present and supportive with someone who has been eroding the field that the mustard seed needs to settle in.

But I realize that there are also more subtle forms of self-destruction that we all fall prey to. Perhaps sleeping—not being truly present—when praying or meditating is just a more subtle form of the heroin addict's actions. We have this wonderful opportunity, we've set time aside in our lives, and we're not staying awake to ask, "What is it within me that can save me?" It's very interesting how we can get right to the edge of liberation

and then not stay awake.

Two other quotes from Jesus are very striking considered together: “Whoever has come to know the world has discovered the body, and whoever has discovered the body is worth more than the world ... Seek a place of rest for yourselves, that you may not become a carcass and be eaten.” The carcass represents attachment to food, sex, sleep, fame, and wealth—worldliness. So one who has become a carcass is one who has a perverted knowledge of the world. A Zen Master might say, “How long have you been carrying around that corpse?,” or, “You’re just a rice bag!” A rice bag is a heavy, hard-to-handle object—so calling someone a rice bag means they have no direction, no vocation.

Each of us needs to find our vocation so we don’t become a carcass and get eaten. I can’t tell you the number of people I’ve watched die who felt like a carcass. Before they take their last breath they’ll say in a discouraged way, “What was this life all about?” It’s so sad. It’s possible to find good teachers and traditions that can help us to get in balance with our carcass, so that it becomes a vehicle for our vocation rather than the container of our greed, anxieties, and misconceptions.

But there’s no need to hold to that idea of “I am a carcass; I’m going to be eaten.” Jesus said that to wake us up. It’s a little warning: “Oh yeah, I know what it feels like to be stuck in my body, kowtowing to every desire that it has.” So just wake up.

Someone once asked Jesus, “When will the final rest for the dead take place, and when will the new world come?” People wanted to know that from the Buddha, too. They would ask, “What is Buddha? What is dharma? Show me the way!” We all think, this life is not so great, so when is it going to get better? Jesus answered, “What you look for has already come, but you do not know it.” The Buddha said it’s like a fish swimming in water and saying, “I’m thirsty.”

Sometimes it’s easier for someone else to see your Buddha-nature than it is for you. But the work begins with each of us. It’s in our center. We have to find our guts, our ability to be in balance with those five things: food, sex, sleep, fame, wealth. Dying without ever really knowing who we are can seem easier than finding out what we’re responsible for in this life.

Each of us has the ability to open to “what am I?,” whatever the situation. There are tremendous opportunities to learn, to get out of the safe zone and into the regions that are more difficult. What’s important is to be uncontrived, not to have an idea, but to open up each moment to what’s going on right now. We may need to prepare the soil, but we always have the mustard seed. Nobody is ever born without it.

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The Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky

Living the Life of Charity

Brother Benjamin, OCSO

Once a young monk said to an old monk, “What is a monk?” The old monk answered him, “A monk is one who asks every day, ‘What is a monk?’”

The Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance is a branch of the Order of Cistercians, a monastic family of Roman Catholic monks and nuns which was founded in 1098 in France. In that year a small group of monks left the Benedictine Abbey of Molesme to build what they called simply the new monastery and to live quietly their monastic life. The Order has continued from that time until now with varying fortunes, and we now have houses of monks and nuns throughout the world. In the seventeenth century there was a further reform of our way of life which had its clearest expression at the Abbey of La Trappe in France; thus, our branch of the Cistercians came to be known popularly as the “Trappists.”

I have experienced Cistercian life as a unity of two opposites. The daily life of a monk or nun is highly scheduled, arranged in a series of moments of prayer, chanting, study, work, solitude, communal action, eating, and sleep. Within this schedule one moves gradually more and more freely, less and less tightly, more and more like a stream flowing, less and less obstructed by the pebbles on the bottom. Control and freedom. Discipline and liberty. At first, and even for some time, these can seem like two things. But are they really the same, or different?

What is it that one monk might say in a journal such as this to a readership which is generally Buddhist? I find