

The Elephant in the Room

Brenda Everson

In social work school, one hears a lot about the so-called “elephant in the room”—that obvious, giant, looming creature consisting of a particular issue (or idea, behavior, etc.) which the client has brought into a session. The therapist may utilize a number of clever techniques to get at the heart of what they believe to be *really* bothering the client—thus avoiding the elephant.

My Christian practice was often like that elephant. I attempted to go around the reality rather than through it. But I found I could not practice Buddhism and deny my Christian roots any more than a therapist could deny what was really taking place in a session.

Acknowledging my Christian roots while practicing Buddhism is not simply a nice thing to do along the spiritual journey, like that finger forever pointing to the moon. For me, it *is* the moon. Acknowledgement of my Christian roots is part of the practice itself. It is a living, breathing element.

So many times in our culture we try something new, not because it is inherently appealing to us, but because we are catapulted out of our dislike for something else. We try a new brand of this or that, whatever suits our surface needs at the moment. It is sometimes no different with our practice direction. We often make “like” and “dislike” under the guise of “spiritual growth.” This is the way my Zen practice began.

Christianity (Catholicism in particular) carries with it a reputation for being highly word-oriented. This is unfortunate because non-verbal contemplation, which over the centuries became an almost exclusively monastic practice, is what lies at the heart of the Christian tradition.

Nurturing the contemplative-at-heart in me, formal Zen practice (as well as Zen-as-everyday-practice) has worked quite well for me for some time. My need for a consistent method and outlet for contemplation with other lay people had found a home. And my “Christian karma” came tailing along, bringing up some key questions for me: How best could I now practice, given that I felt a direction to practice both Christianity and Buddhism? Most importantly, how best could I help others? How best could I love?

This “Christian karma” can best be described as the need to practice Christianity formally. It is not enough to say, “I am a Christian,” if I do not have a direction with

the tradition or the practice. It was within this spirit that I returned to utilizing three techniques for practice: working with a spiritual director, the use of a Christian mantra, and daily readings of the monastic psalter.

The purpose of a spiritual director in the Christian tradition is much the same as that of a teacher in our own Zen tradition. It is someone who can provide “hits” when needed, as well as listen in a non-judging way to what is surfacing in the student’s spiritual life. He or she can also serve as a human bridge between Christianity and other spiritual traditions. I chose a director who is a Catholic priest, and has also practiced Zen.

I find using the Jesus Prayer as a mantra and the recitation of psalms very useful tools. The Jesus Prayer (“Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”) can be broken into two parts during sitting. On the inhalation, I say “Lord Jesus Christ, son of God ...” and on the exhalation, I say “...have mercy on me, a sinner.” I also say this mantra when using beads.

While some in the Eastern tradition (as well as some of us in the West!) have trouble with the word “sinner,” I turn to its literal translation of “to miss the mark” to aid me in understanding. To miss the mark means keeping myself veiled in ignorance of my true nature. Zen Master Seung Sahn has remarked that to be born is “already a mistake.” I equate that with what one might call “original sin.” The Jesus Prayer, then, becomes a powerful mantra to help unveil the ignorance of the self.

The recitation of psalms in the daily monastic psalter is similar to the chanting one might do in a Zen center. Both have more to do with the power of the present moment and allowing clear perception to exist than with the meaning of the specific words.

These techniques have the same intention as bowing, sitting, and chanting. They are all formal ways in which the in-dwelling God can be recognized, in which Buddhahood can be realized. The solutions to the questions I posed earlier were not to be found in resisting one path and putting the other on a pedestal. Nor were they to be found in attempting some dramatic reconciliation of the two. Original nature can be perceived without diminishing the unique treasures that are inherent in both Buddhism and Christianity.

With the elephant in the room now overt, the tools needed to simply practice are more clear. When I am at liturgy, I am just at liturgy. When I am in the dharma room, I am just in the dharma room. That is the way to just practice, to just help others, to just love.

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