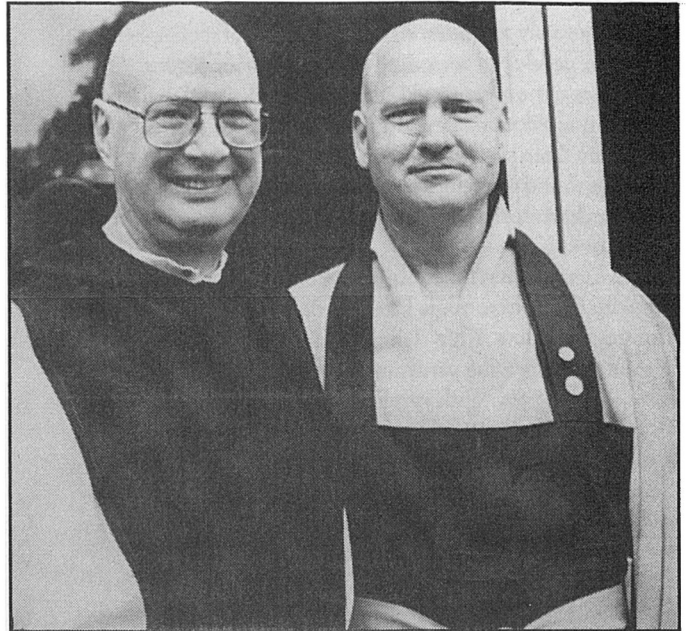


Last summer, the Institute for World Spirituality in Chicago hosted a weekend Christian-Buddhist retreat led by Father Kevin Hunt OCSO and Zen Master Dae Kwang. Two days of silent meditation, with both Christian and Zen chanting. These are excerpts from the Saturday evening question-and-answer period.

Common Ground:

A DISCUSSION
WITH
FATHER
KEVIN HUNT
AND
ZEN MASTER
DAE KWANG



Question: In Christianity, what is important for many people is devotional type experience—thoughts, hymns, psalms all directed to a personal God. This brings much warmth and comfort to many Christians. Now this is a dimension which is not apparent in Buddhism. I am wondering how to understand that. Is this devotional spirituality, which involves thinking and images and relating to a personal God, *extraneous* in Buddhism—say, something Christians do because they do not have a correct understanding of the Still Point or Buddha-Nature?

Father Kevin: In Christianity, you have to consider what is the meaning of “God.” Speaking about God is not the same as knowing God. If you ask me, “What is God?” I’ll answer, “God is a three-letter word.” When it comes down to what these words and images really mean, you run up against a blank wall of Unknowing. There’s an old Christian saying that any affirmation of God is a denial of God. So the question of theistic devotion in Christianity is not a simple one.

Also, the whole question of God in Buddhism is not simple either. When Buddhists talk about God are they talking about the same God that Christians do? No. In Buddhism, the gods are still in the wheel of *samsara* (karma, rebirth). If Christianity had a wheel of *samsara*, we would never be able to place God on that wheel.

In the West, most Christians would not be comfortable with a term like *Shunyata*—the void or infinite emptiness. But these words may be closer to God than many of the concepts and images we use!

Question: I’m still wondering about the whole devotional area.

Father Kevin: These are ways most people have to relate to God. You have devotional sects in Buddhism. Zen is just one small sect in the whole Buddhist tradition.

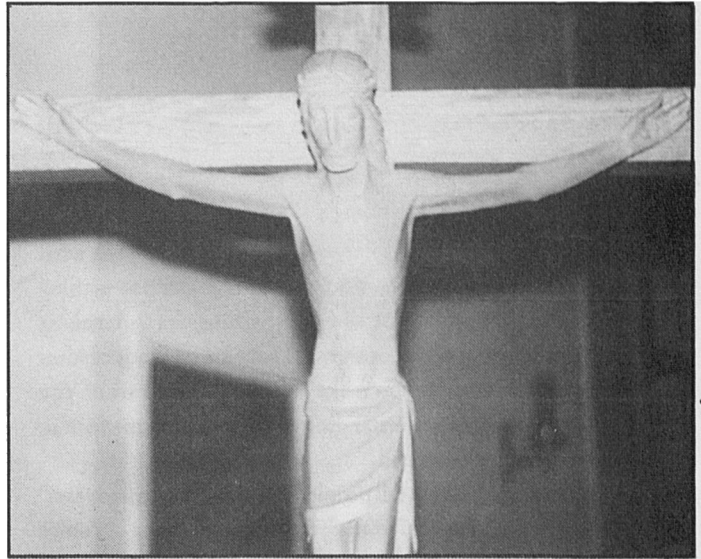
Question: Bowing in Buddhist practice is devotion.

Dae Kwang Sunim: When your mind is clear, *everything* is devotion. When you bow, just bow. When you eat, just eat. People need help, help them. Just do it! That’s true devotion.

Question: But take the Stations of the Cross, for example. If I do that, I’m thinking in very concrete images about a personal God and his *sufferings for the redemption of all human beings*...

Father Kevin: Let me tell you about a monk I once knew who was, I think, a very enlightened man, although he would never have articulated his life in those terms. He would make the Stations of the Cross a dozen times a day. I used to get mad at him—we’d get up at three o’clock in the morning, I’d rush down to church in the dark (this was in South America, so we did not have electricity) and at that hour of the morning, I’d trip over his body, prostrate in front of one of the Stations. To say that what he was doing was thinking about Jesus’ redemptive suffering is, in my opinion, a very superficial way to describe what was happening in the heart and mind of this monk!

The point of a vehicle is to be a vehicle—to take you



Pictures by: Elizabeth Sowa

somewhere. For many people it's a devotional kind of thing; for some people it's more apophatic. A vehicle is anything that helps you.

Question: In our retreat schedule, we have large blocks of free time. What do you do for periods of up to two hours without reading?

Dae Kwang Sunim: We continue to practice all the time. The reason for not reading during the retreat is so that we can focus on the Book of Wisdom here [*points to his chest.*] This is the most important book you'll ever read. If you spend time here [*pointing to his head*], reading *other people's* ideas, that just takes you away from yourself.

Question: I can understand conceptually the issue of not reading [*laughter.*] But the arising of a concept in the mind is an arising of the Buddha mind, too. If you see clearly the nature of a concept, then conceptual thinking is no problem, even on a retreat.

Dae Kwang Sunim: Usually what we do in Zen is read for encouragement rather than for understanding. The two purposes are different. So, for instance, you don't read lives of the saints in order to understand God. Rather, you read lives of the saints to work yourself up to having enough guts to actually *do* something!

Father Kevin: Remember, too, that the time we are devoting to this retreat isn't all that much. It's only about forty-eight hours. You have a lot to pack in, in that time. What you want

to concentrate on is your own experience, your own awareness. To be sure, concepts are not evil; in the Christian tradition we say the Word is God. Concepts come from God. But in a retreat like this the awareness you have to have is *your* awareness—not his awareness, not my awareness, not the awareness of an author of a book. It's very easy to fall into the attempt to get somebody *else's* realization.

My first Zen teacher was a Japanese Master, Sasaki Roshi. He would give *koans* to his students like, "How do you realize Buddha-nature when you're taking a shower?" or "How do you realize Buddha-nature when you're driving a cab?" Once he saw me making the sign of the cross, which we do when we start a prayer, and soon my *koan* was, "How do you manifest God with... what do you call it? Yes, sign of cross! With that how do you manifest God?"

So two of his students were talking, comparing *koans*. One was very concerned—he had no answer for his *koan*, "How do you realize Buddha-nature when you're driving a taxi?" The other had passed the *koan*, so he told him the answer. (Of course, you're not supposed to do that, but...). So the first student goes into Sasaki Roshi for his interview and gives him the same answer the other student had given. Sasaki Roshi's eyes got big, he stared at the student and said, "Oh, wonderful answer! Wonderful answer! [*Pause.*] Now give me *your* answer!"

Question: *Lectio divina* is a practice of reading in a way which invites me into silence; to take the step into silence, into contemplation, I begin with reading. So to me there should be no fear of that kind of reading during a retreat.

Father Kevin: It's not a question of fear; it's a question of what you're doing. Are you reading or are you focusing on your own experience moment to moment? A weekend like this is a weekend for the practice of silence—mind-silence, too. When you leave there will be plenty of time for *lectio divina* as well as other kinds of reading.

Dae Kwang Sunim: In Zen we say you have to digest what you learn in order to understand; that means taking something you've learned from a book or from someone else and making it really and completely your own. There are all kinds of ideas in the world. How do you make any of them your own? You have to digest your understanding so you become one with it, like a cow chewing its cud.

My teacher will often tell people, "Don't read for three years" or "Don't read for five years." By this he's saying, "You've already read enough books, so just get on with it!"

Father Kevin: It's like a kid who wants to be a professional basketball player. He can read every book in the world on how to play basketball, he can read all the lives of the best basketball players, even books of physics on the trajectory of the ball when you throw it with this or that amount of force. But at some point he's got to go out and start bouncing the stupid ball!

Dae Kwang Sunim: There once was a person whose professional life was very secure. But as he got older a spiritual questioning arose in him. To satisfy this urge he got interested in Buddhism and read all the books he could, until he *understood* everything about Buddhism. The man then became anxious about his financial situation. After reading extensively in the area of investment, he *understood* everything about retirement plans. Next he started to worry about his body. He wasn't getting any younger and perhaps some exercise like swimming would help him. Again, he went to the library. After reading every available book he *understood* everything about swimming, even the theories regarding rigorous competitive training. He then went down to the lake, jumped in and drowned. [*There are several moments of silence.*] That's the end. So *understanding* cannot help you. It's a Zen story!

Question: In Christianity, the deepest level of experience is described as an I-Thou relation between you and God. Can you explain why there is no I-Thou relation in Buddhism?

Dae Kwang Sunim: In Buddhism, we say that everything is one, so there is ultimately no I-Thou. If you take away the idea of "I" and take away the idea of "Thou," then what is there?

Question: So there is no ultimate relationship in Buddhism as there is in Christianity?

Dae Kwang Sunim: Everything is relationship. Everything *is* direct connectedness; you just *think* that it isn't. Our job is simply to become one with everything. That's *being* relationship. So if you take away the idea of "I" and take away the idea of "Thou," what do you get? Quick! Tell me! [*No answer.*] I'm sitting here answering your question. That's better than any *idea* concerning "I-Thou" relationships.

Question: Would you describe how you became interested in Zen practice?

Father Kevin: I didn't get interested in Buddhism and Zen as something I wanted to study. I basically got into it because the traditional Christian explanations of what my practice was didn't quite satisfy me. Like a drum, to get the right tone, you have to tighten the skin on the drum head. So, too, in order to firm up my practice, I learned some of their ways of doing things.

Dae Kwang Sunim: I was raised Christian. The reason I went to Buddhism is much like what Father Kevin said. The Christian tradition I was raised in didn't have any contemplative practice. I became interested in Zen Buddhism because it contained a very strong tradition of practice. I saw it not so much as an alternative to Christianity but as offering something I had never encountered before.

Question: Were you dissatisfied then with Christianity?

Dae Kwang Sunim: I wasn't dissatisfied. I wanted something different. Actually, many people use Zen meditation to realize what Christianity is all about. Zen, you may have noticed, is very generic. It's like drinking pure, cool water when you're thirsty. Zen points to something *before* thinking, before all your ideas. Actually God is before your idea of God, and so is Buddha. And what is that? What are you? That's the question! And how do you *attain* that?

Buddha likened the human situation to a man who has just been shot in the chest by an arrow. Before he gets treated for the wound, he wants to know who shot the arrow. He also wonders which tribe made the arrow. How strong was the bow and what trajectory did the arrow take to pierce his chest in such a manner? While he is asking these questions, he dies. The most important thing in this situation is getting treatment.

The Buddha was only concerned with one thing: human suffering and taking away human suffering. He refused to talk about anything else because it was not helpful to people. He went instead right to the heart of the matter, the matter of life and death. Christ, too, was not a scholar; he was not a theologian. He pointed directly to the human condition and how to relieve it. If you look at it that way, everything else pales.