

Adapted from a talk during a Christian-Buddhist retreat at Providence Zen Center.

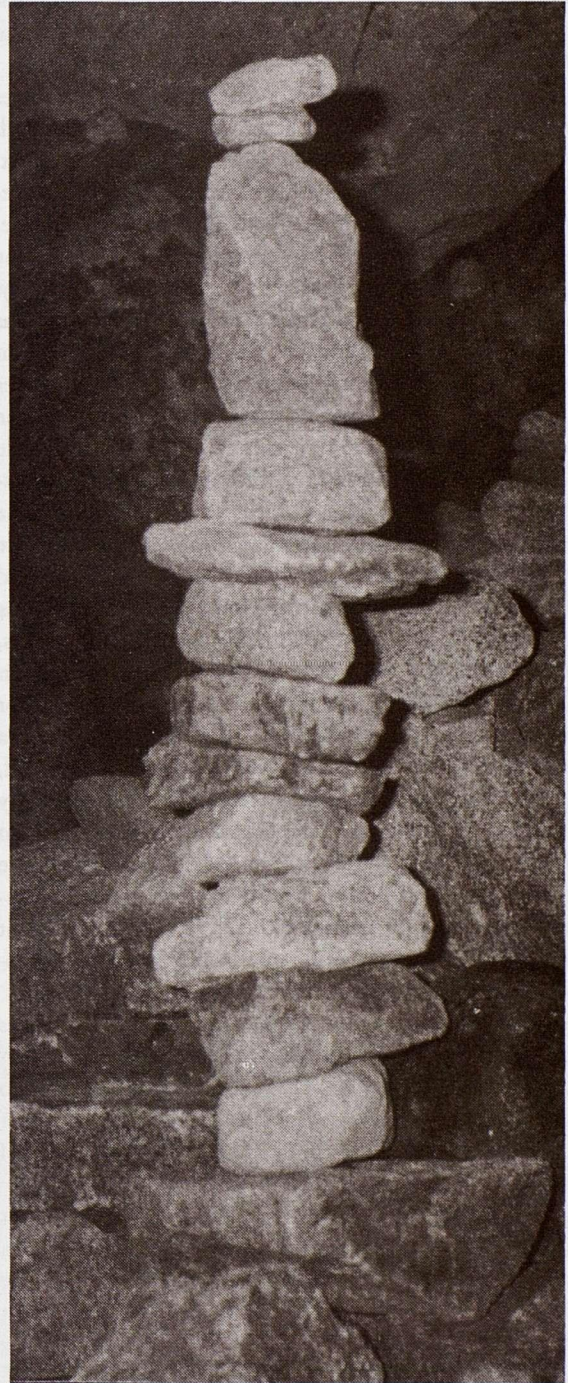
NUNC CAEPIT, DOMINE, NUNC CAEPIT

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I come from a Christian background, and from the Catholic Christian tradition which is not generally thought of as the most avant garde of Christian traditions. For many Christians the idea of meditation appears as something foreign or new. It might be a good idea for those of you who do come from a Christian background to have some idea of the tradition of Christian meditation so that this particular way of practice can be integrated into your own history.

When Jesus appeared on the scene two thousand years ago the four Gospels tell us that one of the first things he preached was "the Kingdom of God is at hand" or as some have it "the Kingdom of God is within you." The whole of Christianity, the whole of Christian practice, is basically a way of life that works to realize this "Kingdom of God." Now, the phrase "Kingdom of God" is a circumlocution because at the time of Jesus, as it is still in the Jewish tradition today, the name of God revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai was never spoken. The "Kingdom of God" is just a way of saying that God is in us, God is present to us. From the earliest days of Christianity, therefore, there has been an urge toward realizing these words of Jesus concretely. Who is God? How can I realize God dwelling within me? How do I experience God right here and right now? This urge is what brings us here today, no matter how you may have articulated it.

Today we are going to teach you a way or method of meditation or contemplation so this urge can be realized. If you already have a practice then it will be a day of encouragement to go more deeply into your practice. We all need to be encouraged in our practice. The practice itself is not difficult, but it does demand patience. Patience in our effort to meditate is one of the keys to growing in this work. The founder of the Western monastic tradition, St. Benedict, says in his Rule for Monks that the monk or practitioner of meditation can "by patience... participate in the Passion of Christ." More generally, it is held that all human beings have this desire for the absolute, or transcendent, or God, not just monks. Today, many have difficulty with the word 'God.' We must always be aware that whatever word we use to indicate that or for whom we



strive, that word must always fail. As one brother in my community is wont to say: "The word 'God' is the most meaningless word in the English language because we can not comprehend what it stands for." As the medieval theologians used to say: "Any affirmation of God is a denial of God."

For a minute I want to point out some differences between Christianity and Buddhism. Buddhism has had, since the time of the Buddha, a strong monastic element. The Buddha himself left home to become a monk, practicing the traditional Indian form of the monastic life. However, within Christianity monasticism did not come into existence until the latter part of the fourth century. Traditionally the first Christian to become a monk was Anthony of Egypt. The dates generally accepted for him are 250CE to 350CE, for he was said to have lived for over a hundred years. The earliest Christians, those before the time of Anthony, were not monks but ordinary people living in the cities and villages of Rome and the fertile crescent. Yet we have a large number of writings that come down to us from Anthony's time and before it, that are considered part of the tradition of Christian mysticism and contemplation. These writings, most of them sermons preached by bishops, were aimed at ordinary Christians, those which we today would designate as 'those sitting in the pews.' The largest part of these texts were homilies or commentaries on the Scriptures in what we would call a reflexive or meditative mode. They, as I have mentioned, were directed toward ordinary people who had ordinary lives. They were not aimed at esoterics who lived apart from the mass of human beings. The Christian people were throughout their history a people of prayer and contemplation. Indeed, the Bishops gathered at Vatican II made it a definition of what it means to be a Christian: "The Christian people are a contemplative people."

I say all this not to create a distinction that separates Christians from those of other religions or beliefs, rather, I say it to encourage those of my own tradition. We need to reclaim our own great tradition of contemplative prayer which has come down from past ages and make it part of our lives.

The contemplative life is a way, and as a way it is going to take time and effort. That is why it is called a practice. The time part is where the patience comes in. There is a tendency for those who are begging to merely project great effort to say to themselves: "I will get an hour every morning for my meditation or, at least twenty minutes." Suddenly a pipe beaks in the basement, or a child gets sick

and lo... days pass and one realizes that there has been no time for meditation. The temptation is then to say: "Oh! I just don't have the time I ought to for meditation, it must not be for me." But that is not what perseverance and patience are about. If days or even months pass and you realize that you haven't been meditating—begin again. Perseverance is 'begin again,' no matter if you begin again five times, or five thousand times. Begin again!... and again, and again. That is what perseverance is: Begin again. There is a phrase in the Old Latin psalter that says: "Nunc caepit, Domine, nunc caepit." "Now I begin, O Lord, now I begin." This phrase has helped many Christian monks throughout the ages to go on in their practice to persevere. There is also a well known book on Zen, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, which tells us the same. We must always consider ourselves novices and begin again each day, each moment.

We must also be aware that this practice, or any other practice of meditation takes time and a certain amount of effort. This is not something that you can achieve in "three easy lessons." We are a society that looks for the easy way, we want to get where we are headed as fast as possible. But there is one good thing about meditative practice, especially this one: if you stick with it, persevere, then it will achieve its work in you. You will gain enlightenment. The way of Zen meditation looks hard and takes a certain amount of physical effort, but it is the persevering in the practice that is hard.

Also, a special manner of life is not of great importance. Meditation can be practiced anywhere and at any time. It is true that many religious traditions have developed special ways of life and special settings which are helpful for meditation, but such things are only aids... something like a person who wants to be a great golfer. It is a big help to be able to devote your life to playing golf, but there are many who never achieve professional status but who are great golfers. A setting such as this meditation center, or a monastery can be a great help if you can survive such a life. It provides the space and setting and time for intensive practice. But the monastery or meditation center can be a horrible situation if it is not for you. It's not necessary.

Any situation can be the setting for intensive practice. When I speak of intensive practice, I am not speaking of the amount of time that a person can devote to actual meditation. A mother of children cannot have the same quantity of time that a monastic has to give to meditative practice, but she can make great strides in meditation by

getting whatever amount of time that she can spare out of her busy schedule. Indeed, many non-monastics make greater advancement than some monastics because the monastics can be lazy in practice despite the fact that their life is set up for meditation.

The fact that you have come here today is a sign that you are drawn to meditation. You may also decide that this particular way of practice is not for you at this moment. There are many ways of doing meditation: ritual practice, chanting practice, mantra practice, intellectual practice and other ways. Sometimes religious traditions form specific schools centered on individual practices. The vast majority of traditions usually have a mixture of all these practices. Each of us has to find what particular practice is most suitable for us. And even that can change. I was told when I first entered my monastery that generally one's practice tended to become more simple as it grew. So don't be surprised if things change.

I am a Trappist monk who has practiced Zen meditation since the early 1970s. I find that it fits in very well with my ordinary life in my monastery. This year I received permission to live outside my monastery to do koan practice with a Jesuit who lives and teaches in Jersey City at St. Peter's College, by the name of Robert Kennedy. He is a Roshi accepted in Maezumi Roshi's lineage of Japanese Zen.

It was easier for me to get permission to work with a fellow Catholic priest than it might have been otherwise. Actually my daily life is not that much different than what I would be doing in my own monastery except that I don't have to go to work every day. I get a little more time for study.

Just to show you that one can always learn more, I found that I had a tendency to sit bent over to the side.

I thought for all these years that I had been sitting straight. I did find that I had a significant amount of back pain but always thought that was the price I had to pay. My posture was corrected so that I was sitting in the correct way: up straight, back with a proper curve and tummy out. Even after thirty years I still needed help.

One common problem with meditation is that frequently people come to Zen practice having read books on Zen. They have been impressed with a story like the one where a newly arrived monk goes for his first interview with the teacher. "Where have you come *from*?" asks the teacher. "From such and such a monastery" is the reply. "How did you leave?" he is again asked. Boom—sudden enlightenment! We come to our practice with many ideas, most of them having to do with enlightenment, especially thinking that enlightenment is going to solve all our problems. Maybe even I'll walk six feet off the floor. (I can remember when I first entered my monastery how disappointed I was to find that none of the old monks could do that. In my humility, I understood that a newcomer like myself would not be able to do that... but the senior monks?) Meditation is very ordinary, very common. In my tradition we say that the best monks are always the most ordinary. And my experience is that that is true.

So I encourage you in your practice of meditation; persevere, don't worry. It will bring with it its own suffering, but nothing you will not be able to bear. If it brings crucifixion, it also brings resurrection. It doesn't matter about your age or what life you are leading. If there is any contradiction in your life, meditation with change that. So don't worry. Just practice, start today... persevere.

