



# The God Gene

Father Kevin Hunt  
From a talk at a Christian-Buddhist retreat  
at Providence Zen Center

I don't know if any of you have seen or read *Time Magazine* this week. It's not my favorite magazine, but taken in small doses, it's fine. It's got a somewhat interesting article on a topic that's called, "The God Gene." It's about a scientist who has claimed that he has discovered a gene, or a couple of genes, that make us human beings want to seek God. Of course, there were about a hundred or so other scientists who immediately began to tell him he was crazy, but that's beside the point.

I don't know if we do, have that gene, it's just very interesting. About once every five years or something like that, some scientist will come out and claim that he's got scientific proof that we do seek the transcendent, we do seek the absolute, we do seek God—and we do it for this reason or that reason, and they can prove it physiologically or scientifically. Not too long ago, someone was even talking about an altruistic gene.

This is a big change from even twenty or twenty-five years ago, when anybody who considered himself a real scientist thought that if you wanted to seek God or wanted to know God, to find the absolute, the best thing to do would be to speak to a psychologist.

Whether we have a gene for altruism or for seeking God, the Christian tradition or the Buddhist tradition

would probably listen somewhat attentively with great courtesy, especially because as professionals, we're supposed to be trained to be courteous listeners [*laughter.*] After the scientist had spent a great deal of time trying to prove this to us, we would probably look at him and say, "So what's up?" Religions automatically assume that we human beings are made for the transcendent, made for the absolute, or made for God. That it should show up in our genes wouldn't surprise us at all.

The reason I bring this up is because when we come to something like this, especially if it is our first exposure to meditation or to Zen meditation, part of us can wonder, "What in God's name are we doing here?"—especially if you have been sitting for a while and everything begins to ache. In your head you might say to yourself, "I could have spent the whole day in front of the TV watching the pre-game, the pre-pre-game, the pre-pre-pre game of the Boston Red Socks, and reruns of game seven or whatever it was that they won. It would be better than sitting here in torture!"

The reason we're here is because, whether you can prove it scientifically or not, human history seems to prove that to seek the absolute, to seek the transcendent, to seek God, is something that all of us are made to do. In Christian terms, we'd say that this is the way we are created. Buddhists might say—even Christians would say—this is the way we evolved. This is the way that the nature that created everything made us.

This élan, this movement, has only been manifested in a few because there's just been too much damn work that has to be done to survive. If you're a farmer, the chances are that you are working out in the fields and, even with a tractor, it's hard. If you're working out in the fields all day, you aren't going to be too inclined to want to sit on a cushion for twenty minutes or a half hour at the end of the day.

Frequently, this has been reserved mostly for the people who can find the time and the leisure to do it. As we have progressed, we probably have more free time than ever before in history. Instead of putting in a sixteen-hour day working in the rice paddy, we sit in an office for seven or eight hours a day. Where before it took three hundred days of the year to get enough food, now we have enough material things available to us so that we don't have to put in that much effort simply to survive. This gives us more freedom. It's not too unusual to find people who come to a retreat like this.

Frequently, you'll find a number of, as we say nowadays, senior citizens showing up. They have arrived at a position not only of economic independence, but whatever they had wanted to do, they have done. Often you will find people who have raised their kids, and now are retired, and all of a sudden, into their life pops the question, "What's it all about?"

I remember a song that was popular a number of years ago: "What's it all about, Alfie?" The same thing is happening to a lot of people.

In the Christian tradition, this is not surprising. The early Christians were known as people of prayer and meditation. This was considered to be a normal part of what it meant to be a Christian. The early monastics, who had more leisure, went to the only source of historical understanding they had available to them, the Bible. Their anthropology was formed especially by the first few books of Genesis. One favorite story was that of Adam and Eve, because in the story they were able to get an answer to what it meant to be a human being. After all, these were the first two human beings created by God, according to Christian tradition.

When most of us hear about Adam and Eve, we immediately think, "Oh, isn't that a delicious apple? Can I have a bite? Here, Adam, that tasted good, you have a bite, too!" The early Christians mistook that for vanity because they came from the lowest strata of society, so they knew what sin, suffering, and pain were all about. They did not get into great philosophical discussions about evil. All they had to do was open their eyes and ears and they understood it, but they were still intrigued by the story of Adam and Eve. One part they were particularly intrigued by was what happened after Adam and Eve bit the apple.

If you remember, they ate the apple, and their eyes were opened, and they knew that they were naked. This is not just anti-nudist propaganda. They covered themselves, and hid in the forest when they heard God walking in the garden. The question many early Christians asked themselves was, "Why is God walking in the garden? He created the whole world, why did he have to go find the garden of Eden to go walking in?" (This is my translation of the original Hebrew.) [*laughter*]

They came up with the answer that God walked in the garden of Eden and called Eve because he wanted to talk to Adam and Eve. Logical, isn't it? That's what it was for—he wanted to chat. From that, they came to the conclusion that to be a human being was to be a god-daughter. To be a human being was to have this innate capacity and desire to talk to God. If any of you have ever read any books on Christian prayer and meditation, that's one of the simplest explanations of prayer and meditation: to talk to God.

I am using the word "talk" in its broadest sense. It doesn't mean, yada-yada-yada-yada. I think a good example of "talk" in this sense is when you see a couple who love each other and have spent years together. You will see them simply sitting in the living room, one might be reading the paper and the other might be knitting or reading a book, and there is no need to talk, at least very little. Are they talking? Yes. They have a complete awareness of the presence of the other person. Or you'll see an elderly couple walking down the street holding hands. They may walk several blocks without saying a word. And even with young lovers, it's the same thing. When you just walk with somebody that you love and are close to them, you know you're getting someplace. You don't have to examine it, or the relationship, you just know that you are completely present to each other.

This understanding of what it means to be a human being is a very traditional understanding. Christians—and I use the word Christian not because I'm making them better than anybody else, but because that is the way they refer to themselves—are God-talkers. In some of the very early apologetics and defenses of the Christian tradition, non-Christians would say that they were not a very pious people because they didn't have public assemblies. Well, they were being persecuted, so they didn't have any public assemblies. The Christians would say, "Oh yes, we do. But we've been taught that when we want to pray, we go into our inner room, close the door, and speak to the Father in secret. And the Father who hears in secret will respond."

No matter what the immediate reason is for you being here at this retreat, it doesn't matter. It really doesn't matter. Because the real reason we are here is to simply become the most complete human beings that we can be. Is meditation absolutely necessary for that? No. But practicing is one of the best ways of achieving it.

Two things: don't worry whether you do it perfectly or not. There was a well-known English author at the beginning of the century who said something very, very wise when he said, "Whatever is worth doing, is worth doing badly." So just try. The other thing, is that it is going to take some effort, and don't be surprised at that. Anything that is worth doing is worth the effort in doing it. Through meditation we have an opportunity to learn and attain something, so don't forget it's a way—it's a means. Don't give it any more value than that. It's a great way. It's a great means. Just try it.

One of the great problems in trying to practice is that we all have wonderful ideas. We come to a place like this and we see the high ceiling and the beautiful brown wooden rafters, the skylight, the great gold Buddha sitting there on the altar, and the pagoda. At my monastery, we also have a roof that's held by wooden beams, but a lot larger than these are. Over our altar, we have a beautiful stained-glass window of the Madonna, and people come into the place, their mouths drop, and they are just in awe. The temptation is to feel, "Gee, if I could only live here I would just go right down the path of meditation and be enlightened or have visions or walk on water, all of these things." "And look at the monks. Aren't those robes lovely?" Every once in a while, I find myself right in style because I have basic white and black clothes. The Yankees have nothing on me.

There is a certain tendency to say, "Gee, I'll try... but." I know this feeling, I've experienced it myself. Like anybody else, I had great moments and long periods of feeling like, "I'm not going to make it. I'm never going to be anything. I'm never going to achieve anything." But in meditation there is no special group. There are no people who are automatically guaranteed that they are going to attain enlightenment or sanctity or whatever else you want. You might have heard the old Christian saying, "The robes don't make the monk." It doesn't matter whether you have white robes or black robes or orange robes, or anything else for that matter.

The area from Coney Island up to the end of Jones Beach is a series of play areas—basketball courts, baseball fields, handball courts, shuffleboard—this goes on mile after mile after mile after mile. Where I used to go, they had a series of basketball courts. The guys loved to go and play basketball. It was very difficult to get onto the court. I'm not much of an athlete—I might be able to hit a baseball if I strained hard enough. But you'd go down there and wait for hours to get on a court. The guys that played basketball were just ordinary people. The common guys. Back in those days, your pro basketball players, they didn't make that much money. So they didn't have the entourages like the professional ball players have today. You would go down there and see men from the New York Knicks and they'd be playing ball. There were any number of people just from the neighborhood, or different neighborhoods, who would make these pro ball players look as if they were just learning the game. The reason for that was that a lot of these young men loved basketball, but for one reason or other, could never get to college. I don't know how it is now, but in those days, unless you played college ball, you could never get into the pros. But they played purely for the love of the game, and they were marvelous ball players, and as I said, better than some of the pros.

This is also true in the life of meditation. I happen to be a professional. Zen Master Dae Kwang happens to be a professional. What's a professional? A professional is someone paid to do what he would love to do anyway. Just as a basketball player, if he really loves the game, if he's lucky enough to get paid for playing the game, he's a professional. But to be a professional is not the whole story. Why are we practicing meditation? Because we human beings are meditators. It's a whole different ball game. Sooner or later, you come to realize that. In the Buddhist tradition, they'll tell you how lucky it is for you to arrive at the part where you get to do some meditation. Do you realize how many times you've been reborn? Kalpas and kalpas have passed. You started out as a young bacterium and then you were reborn and you became this and then you fell back to be a bacterium and then you go over and over and over again, thousands and thousands and hundreds of thousands of years. Now you are a human being. Now you are called for meditation, and you had better do it now. That's my translation of the Sanskrit.

We Christians don't put it that way, but we also realize that what we would call the grace or a call to meditation is something that sooner or later every one of us gets. And every one of us is called to it. It doesn't matter how old you are when you respond. The Sixth Patriarch has many legends around him, but some people say he was twelve or fourteen years old when he got his enlightenment. He was a young man. Others have come to a life of meditation or responded to the call to prayer when they were in their sixties, seventies, or even their eighties. It doesn't matter when you begin, because we are all beginners. There is a very well-known book on Zen meditation by the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center that has a wonderful title, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. In the Christian tradi-

tion, when I entered the monastery I was told, "You will always be a novice." I was lucky, I had a novice abbot who was a very ordinary type of person. Every time I went in and started complaining about how rapidly I was getting nowhere in this life of meditation, he would quote to me a Latin phrase that was a mistranslation of a Greek mistranslation of the original Hebrew in the Psalms. And that phrase was, "Nunc caepit, domine. Nunc caepit." Which means, "Now I begin, Lord. Now I begin."

It doesn't matter what happened this morning. Whether you sat there completely attentive, completely aware, or you sat there thinking, "My God, my knees are killing me, my back is bothering me, I have to do all this shopping after I leave here, I wonder what the kids are doing." It doesn't matter because it's now that we start. Now we begin.

No matter what our life as a human being might be, no matter what our job is, no matter how active it might be at times, there is no perfect lifestyle. All of us have our problems with the way that we live. All of us have our distractions. All of us think, "Gee, if only this could happen, if only this would pass, I could be the perfect meditator. If I only had a different abbot. If I only could do this. Even if you're in a monastery,—don't worry, they find enough work for you. In fact, they find too much work for you.

There is no lifestyle that can prevent one from becoming a person of meditation. In some ways of living, you might be able to do it in more healthful circumstances. I know one person, for example, who lives in New York City at the end of one of the subway lines. He practices every day. He has about a forty-minute ride, so he does his meditation then. I'm not sure I could do it, but he does it.

The thing is that you simply do it. Do it as best as you can. If you fail, if suddenly you turn around and it's gone, you suddenly say to yourself, "Gee, it's a week since I meditated last." Or it's a month, or it's a year, or it's five years. Don't worry. Nunc caepit, Domine. Nunc caepit. Now I begin. Now I begin.

Each time is a completely new time. Now is the time when you are perfectly enlightened. Now is the time when you are, as Christians would say, perfectly transformed in Christ. Not tomorrow, not yesterday, not this morning, not at three o'clock. But right now.

You will find in the Zen literature and in Christian literature hundreds of examples of people who have attained the heights of meditation, coming from where they are convinced they have failed completely. Most of us have to fail completely. If you think you're failing, you're doing a very good job; just try.

I knew an old monk whose favorite saying was, "Brother, discouragement is the Devil's favorite walking stick." He always had a cane with him. *[laughter]*

The emphasis you will see is not on ideals. It's on how to do it, but most of all: doing it. And doing it over and over and over. 