

## **The Identity of No Identity**

**To study the Buddha way is to study the self;**

**To study the self is to forget the self.**

**To forget the self is to be confirmed by the ten thousand things.**

**From “Genjokoan” by Dogen Zen-ji, 13<sup>th</sup> century Japanese Zen Master**

It may seem strange to see Zen meditation offered at a Christian Church. To the divided mind—the mind that constantly sees the world in terms of either/or, good/bad, right/wrong, friend/enemy—the mind that sees everything through the lense of what Buddhists call dualism—to such a mind, Buddhism and Christianity are not only separate religions (one with a God, one with no god), but antithetical, mutually exclusive, contradictory.

If one is coming from a Christian perspective, the verse from Jesus comes immediately to mind: “no man can serve two masters—for either he will love the one and hate the other, or he will despise the one and cling to the other.” (Matthew 6:24)

Even the Buddhist may feel that they are utterly irreconcilable, for how can a Buddhist accept the idea of God?

And yet, as my essay on American Buddhism makes clear, Christians have long been fascinated with Buddhism, at least from the time when priests from the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) went as missionaries to Japan in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. For increasing numbers of people over the past fifty years, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, that interest has turned from an intellectual curiosity to a passionate commitment to practice Zen as a way of deepening one’s own faith as a Christian. Particularly since the writings of the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, dialogue between Buddhists and Christians has become a mutual exploration between equals. Interfaith dialogue between Buddhist and Christian monks and laity, all devoted to contemplation and/or meditation as a way of life, has become itself a form of spiritual practice. To Merton’s many writings have now been added many others’, including those of John Cobb, Paul Knitter, Robert Kennedy and Reuben Habito. Here on Long Island, in addition to Zen at United Church, other groups meet frequently for Zen at St. Ignatius Retreat House in Manhasset and the Tabor Center in Oceanside.

In general, Roman Catholics have led the way in this dialogue because of Protestants’ inherent aversion to mysticism as an over-concern with self, as if it were a form of spiritual narcissism. All too often, Protestants have remained narrowly focused on the Bible as the foundation of Christian faith as if the text itself

were God, rather than being the *evocateur* of the encounter between the human and the divine. The Reformation exalted the Word of God and individual conscience over allegiance to an institutional authority, whether political or ecclesiastical. Ironically, however, the Bible which was used to overcome barriers between God the people, all too often has become a barrier itself, putting the written word in the place of the Living Word, thus neglecting the soul's need to directly experience the ineffable.

Precisely such clinging to the written word makes it hard to enter Zen practice because Zen aims at an experience of reality that "goes beyond words and phrases." In Zen, all words are mere fingers pointing to the moon—not the moon itself, not reality itself. To go beyond the written word is to find the truth in the living word that emerges from facing the emptiness of all things, a truth found in silence.

Many people feel attracted to Zen- its culture, its calligraphy, its sense of presence and its emphasis on what Westerners call paradox, especially known in koans. Yet they may hold back from actually trying it for fear of abandoning their Christian identity. Or more profoundly, they may fear losing their identity altogether. This betokens a fear that is at the heart of the spiritual journey for Buddhists and Christians alike. We have all spent much of our life energy constructing a sense of self- who we are in our vocation, our class, our race, nationality and religion, our relationships with partners, our gender and sexual orientation. These identities which we have struggled so hard to build and sustain, make up our very core sense of who we are. We are these things, and if any of them gets threatened—our physical or intellectual ability, for example—we are disoriented, we feel at sea, lost in a great ocean.

These various pieces of our identity tell us who we are. They are essential if we are to function in the world. They are elements of our ego, who we are as the unique individuals we are, separate from and different from others, even when we are members of the same family, tribe, club, race or nation. But they limit our capacity for care and, when these pieces of ego identity are taken by themselves, they leave us in isolation and alienation.

We have all worked hard to become the particular selves we are. We have fought and suffered to make a sense of self of which we can be proud and in which we can feel secure, safe, solid. Who we are religiously—as Buddhist, Christian, Jew, Muslim or Bahai, for example, is an essential part of that overall sense of self. We struggle not only to build it but to keep it fixed, permanent and immortal. We may imagine our eulogies or headstones, or wish that we could, like Tom Sawyer, eavesdrop on our own funeral to hear what people will say about us. We imagine what heaven will be like and whether we will see our loved ones who have died.

The secret terror that holds us back from facing ourselves in meditation of whatever form is the same terror that wakes us up in the middle of the night, the same fear of being alone, the same fear that drives us to build skyscrapers,

corporations, churches and to amass fortunes (at least in our dreams) and accumulate power (whether of an army general or a custodian): we fear losing our identity; we fear being a nothing and a nobody. Everything we have worked so hard to maintain in our lives has been to a large degree motivated by this core fear and a search for the antidote: a fixed, solid, unchanging sense of self, our personal ego. We try to build a fixed, permanent self that will outlast change, survive intact beyond time and decay. We will argue and fight to defend this ego/self whenever it is threatened.

This fear, and our reaction to it, is precisely what Buddhism identifies as the cause of our suffering. And it is precisely this ego that we have constructed that both Christianity and Buddhism urge us to let die in order that our true self, the self made in the image of God, according to Christianity, the self that is no-self of Buddhism, can come into its own.

To sit in meditation is to face the reality that everything, including our sense of self, is impermanent. Nothing lasts in any given form.

If we open ourselves to this truth of our existence, our carefully constructed boundaries of self that we struggled so hard to achieve begin to melt. As “I,” the separate self fought for so long and hard, begin to fall apart, change and fade—as “I” disappear, what remains?

Everything. The entire universe. Cars honk, water drips, and children laugh and play. Just as before, except now “I” becomes “them” and “it.” Instead of a separate self there is “not two”, no separation between “I” and “you.” Thus we become one with all things and now what happens to Johnny or Paola is not separate from me. I feel her joy, his pain, and I care. “I” disappears and compassion is born. I become Buddha. I am Christ. I am nobody. This is a great achievement.

This is the beginning, not the end, of the spiritual journey. This is why we practice.