

**Divergence, convergence: Buddhist-Christian encounters.  
(includes related article on a meeting between Thomas Merton and  
the Dalai Lama, and on other meetings between Buddhists and  
Christians)(Cover Story)**

Leo D. Lefebure

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A Zen Buddhist teacher sets a statue of Jesus on an altar alongside the Buddha and lights incense to both. A Catholic priest sits cross-legged in meditation and attends to his breathing as he has been instructed by Zen teachers. Increasingly, Buddhists and Christians are borrowing from each other's traditions, and the results present new opportunities and new questions for both religions.

Generations of Christian missionaries journeyed to Asia to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. Some discovered in the religions they encountered there an experience of meditation so powerful that it changed their lives. Buddhist teachers, in turn, came to Europe and the U.S. to share the wisdom of the Buddha, and some found their own practice transformed by the witness of Jews and Christians. The effects of these encounters have been felt across the world, as many Westerners have turned to Buddhist and other Asian forms of meditation, seeking peace and personal integration in a frenetic and fragmented world. Buddhists, in turn, have pondered the meaning of social justice and action - partly in response to questions from Christians.

The encounter of Christianity and Buddhism is affecting members of both religions, and Buddhism is leaving more and more traces even on secular American culture. Phil Jackson cites his use of Zen practices as coach of the Chicago Bulls. In 1993 Bill Moyers's television series and book *Healing and the Mind* featured stress reduction programs that use techniques of Buddhist meditation and yoga as part of holistic health care programs. In one interview, John Kabat-Zinn, author of *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*, described his attempt to take the art of cultivating awareness from Buddhist and Hindu meditation and make this available to Americans. Recent scientific research has confirmed many of the beneficial physical and psychological effects of sitting and walking meditation, whether these practices are done in a religious context or not.

Westerners have turned to Buddhism for a variety of reasons. For some, Buddhist meditation practice offers a concrete, pragmatic method for facing anxiety, healing emotional wounds, dwelling in the present, and developing a deeper sense of peace and loving-kindness. People alienated from the traditional theistic beliefs of Christianity or Judaism may be attracted to a frame of reference that does not include a creating and redeeming God. Some converts to Buddhism have complained that Christianity merely talks about a loving God, whereas Buddhism offers effective strategies to change one's awareness and cultivate a peaceful, loving attitude.

The appearance of Zen and other forms of Buddhism in Christian prayer raises questions about the relation between Buddhist practice and Christianity, especially the Christian mystical tradition. Do the two traditions converge in a profound way, or are they radically different? Is it possible to appreciate the distinctiveness of each tradition and also find a common basis for understanding and action?

Is it possible to practice both religions at the same time while maintaining religious integrity?

Christian understandings of creation set the framework for aR aspects of Christian faith and theology. Christian language about sin and grace, redemption and forgiveness, assumes a God who created a world that is different from God yet intimately related to God. For Buddhists, everything in the universe is interdependent, and there is no creating God who radically transcends the world. While Buddhists have many different perspectives on cosmology, they agree that everything arises in mutual relation to everything else. Amid the variety of Buddhist symbols and expressions for the unconditioned or the ultimate, the principle of nonduality asserts that ultimate reality is not other than this world. Ultimate reality is just this present moment, as it is related to all other moments. Some have claimed that the experience of the ultimate is fundamentally the same in both religions and that the difference between Buddhist and Christian perspectives is merely a conceptual distinction. Others stress@rightly, I would say - that the concepts and symbols used by a religion profoundly shape the experience of its followers, and thus cannot be dismissed as unimportant. While some hold that both religions share a common mystical core and others claim that the religions are so different that there is no basis for mutual understanding, it seems more likely that there is a complex intertwining of similarities amid differences.

One of the pioneers in the 20th-century Christian encounter with Buddhism was a German Jesuit priest, Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle, S.J. (1898-1990). He established for many Christians the tone and framework for approaching Buddhism. In 1943 Lassalle, who would later be a survivor of the bombing of Hiroshima, decided to study Zen so that he could understand Japanese culture more deeply and evangelize it more effectively. He went through rigorous training under Zen monks in Japan, and was acknowledged by his Zen teachers as a master. Lassalle became convinced that Christians could experience satori or enlightenment and that they should integrate that experience into Christian life and practice. While Lassalle tended to regard the experience of the Zen Buddhist and the Catholic mystic as identical, he always remained firmly rooted in his own Catholic faith.

After the publication of his first book, *Zen: Way to Enlightenment* (published in German in 1958, in English in 1968), Lassalle was ordered by Rome not to publish anymore on this topic. Though his Jesuit superiors acknowledged that he had to obey the order, they also encouraged him to be faithful to the values he had discovered on his spiritual path and "just go on quietly sitting." Meanwhile, Buddhists wondered about the legitimacy and meaning of Lassalle's experiment, some judging it be a heretical form of Zen.

With the Second Vatican Council a new atmosphere of openness and dialogue arose in the Catholic Church. Lassalle wrote additional books and journeyed across the world, leading Christians in intense Zen retreats called sesshins. Toward the end of his long life, Catholic authorities again expressed concern about the use of Eastern techniques of meditation in Christian prayer. In 1989, when Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger issued a letter to the Catholic bishops of the world, warning them against abuses of Christian prayer through Eastern forms of meditation, many Catholics in Asia were disturbed. Lassalle recounted his earlier experience of being silenced and advised: "Just go on quietly sitting."

What is most striking from a broader historical perspective is not that Ratzinger expressed reservations about Christian-Buddhist interaction but that the cardinal prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith accepted many basic premises of Lassalle's practice. Ratzinger's primary aim was to safeguard the integrity of Christian prayer to the triune God through Jesus Christ. Although his tone toward Buddhist and other Asian methods of meditation was largely suspicious, Ratzinger expanded upon the principle of Vatican II: "Just as the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions Vatican II, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, n.2], neither should these

ways be rejected out of hand simply because they are not Christian. On the contrary, one can take from them what is useful so long as the Christian conception of prayer, its logic and requirements are never obscured" ("Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation," n. 16).

Ratzinger's central concern was that the structure of Christian prayer not be compromised and that the natural effects of physical techniques not be mistaken for the signs of grace. While much of the ensuing discussion focused on the admonitory tone of the letter, Ratzinger explicitly accepted the legitimacy of Catholic Christians employing meditation practices from the great non-Christian religions. One can imagine his stern predecessor, Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, turning over in his grave at this.

The questions that surrounded Lassalle's practice hover around the recent works by a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk and an Irish Catholic Jesuit priest. Thich Nhat Hanh and William Johnston, S.J., have examined the resources of the other tradition and consider themselves enriched by the experience. Moreover, each author moved from his native land to live for decades in a culture shaped by the other religious tradition.

Johnston, who was born in Belfast in 1925, joined the Society of Jesus and went to Japan in 1951. He taught for many years at Sophia University in Tokyo, where he was director of the Institute of Oriental Religions. For Johnston, the move was transforming. "Had I remained in my native Ireland instead of coming to the East," he reflected in 1971, "I might now be an intolerant and narrow-minded papist hurling bricks and bottles at my Protestant adversaries in the cobbled streets of Belfast. Contact with Zen, on the other hand, has opened up new vistas, teaching me that there are possibilities in Christianity I never dreamed of."

In his early studies Johnston concentrated on the medieval mysticism represented by *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a work that prepared him to appreciate Zen practice. During the years before Vatican II, Johnston became interested in Buddhist practice and thought, and he practiced Zen meditation under the direction of Buddhist monks. When he began, it was still unusual for a Catholic priest to attend a Zen retreat, and he later recalled that Japanese Christians were "vaguely pleased but vaguely puzzled."

Johnston came to understand Buddhism under the direction and discipline of Japanese Zen masters who challenged and prodded him to experience reality directly, apart from concepts and images. While Johnston does not place the Buddha on a par with Jesus, he does consider his experience of Christian prayer to have been deepened by his Zen teachers. He expressed the fruits of his encounter in his writings and became well-known as the author of *The Still Point: Reflections on Zen and Christian Mysticism* (1970) and *Christian Zen* (1971).

Johnston rejects the distinction sometimes made between the "prophetic" monotheistic religions and the "mystical" Asian traditions. The biblical tradition itself, especially in such figures as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Elijah, John and Paul, is the source of Christian mysticism, and the Christian's ultimate goal and norm is dying and rising with Jesus Christ. For Johnston, the experience of Buddhist meditation led him not away from the Bible but into a deeper appreciation of the mystical element in the biblical witness itself.

Thich Nhat Hanh was born in Vietnam in 1926, and at the age of 16 he entered a Zen monastery. The war in Vietnam changed his life, convincing him that Buddhist monks and nuns had to be involved in relieving the suffering of the people. He and his colleagues organized a movement known as Socially Engaged Buddhism because it stressed the responsibility of Buddhists to be practically engaged in addressing social questions. Since he and his followers refused to take sides, they were looked on with suspicion by both communists and Americans.

In 1964 Nhat Hanh founded the School of Youth for Social Service, Vanh Hanh University, the La Boi (Palm Leaves) printing press, and a new order of Zen Buddhism, the Tiep Hien Order (the Order of

Interbeing). Then in 1966 he came to the U.S., hoping to influence American leaders and public opinion to end the war. His book *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* (1967) sought to change the awareness of the American public by introducing Vietnamese culture and tradition as the background of the conflict. He later became the leader of the Buddhist delegation at the Paris peace talks, and after the war he was involved in helping refugees and boat people. When the Vietnamese government did not allow him to return to Vietnam, he settled in France. He is currently the leader of the Plum Village monastery near Bordeaux.

Nhat Hanh's earliest impressions of Christianity were shaped by his negative experiences with Christian missionaries who sought to eradicate Buddhism from Vietnam. His later understanding of Christianity was decisively shaped by American Christians such as Martin Luther King Jr., Thomas Merton and Daniel Berrigan. He shared many of their concerns and values, and thanks to their influence he came to consider Jesus a spiritual ancestor. He now has statues of Jesus and the Buddha together in his room at Plum Village, and he lights incense to both figures.

Nhat Hanh is aware of the centrality of God in Christianity, but he does not believe in God. For him, the Christian experience of resting in God is "the equivalent" of what Buddhists experience in touching nirvana. Thus he sees differences in emphasis between Buddhism and Christianity, but no insoluble conflicts. The concept matters little if one has the experience.

Both Johnston and Nhat Hanh locate the primary area of dialogue between the two traditions in religious experience. Both authors are steeped in the Buddha's instructions on breathing and walking meditation and in later Zen Buddhist meditation practice; both cite Gregory of Nyssa and Basil the Great, the early Christian desert fathers, Eastern Orthodox mystics who attained to a sacred quiet through prayer and meditation, and later Christians mystics who gave practical instructions to their disciples on persevering in the life of prayer.

Both Johnston and Nhat Hanh are somewhat distrustful of concepts and turn to the mystical, apophatic tradition in Christianity as a point of contact with Buddhism. Both insist that what is most important is not to define ultimate reality but to experience it and allow it to transform one's life.

Johnston finds this principle exemplified in the teaching of St. John of the Cross on the dark night of the soul, in which all images and concepts disappear and God is experienced as nada (nothing). Following the path of John of the Cross, Johnston advises Christian mystics to stay with reasoning and thinking as long as these processes are fruitful, but to be ready to abandon all such natural activity at a certain stage to allow "the silent inflow of the Spirit." Christian emptiness is an experience of absolute love and compassion. Mystical knowing for Johnston is "obscure, dark, formless knowledge in a cloud of unknowing. It is knowledge that is experienced as nothingness or emptiness or the void," an experience Johnston compares to Buddhist meditation practice.

Emptiness (shunyata) or nothingness and the abandonment of concepts have long been important for Mahayana Buddhists. For Nhat Hanh, the Heart Sutra, which paradoxically \*negates the Four Noble Truths and other fundamental Buddhist teachings, expresses the center of Buddhist wisdom: emptiness means that nothing exists by itself alone, all things "inter-are," arising in mutual interdependence and flowing into future occasions. Appropriating this vision requires us to stop clinging to concepts and notions; they cannot pin down reality. For Nhat Hanh, it is not only the Christian God that cannot be described in concepts, nothing in the universe can be talked about in concepts, because concepts arise from wrong perceptions. Both traditions seek to transform the consciousness and lives of their practitioners through practical disciplines. Nhat Hanh finds much to praise in the Christian desert fathers and the Eastern Orthodox mystics. Johnston compares the Christian via purgativa, the way of purification, especially as described by The Cloud of Unknowing, to Buddhist practices of purification. Though he

acknowledges an irreducible difference in Christian purgation, which is "primarily a following of Christ," he nonetheless finds a common experience in detachment: poverty of spirit is "the kenosis of Jesus... the mu [nothingness] of Zen ... the nada [nothing] of St. John of the Cross." Johnston also compares the Christian experience of dying with Christ to the "great death" in Zen Buddhism which leads to enlightenment, "to a state where ones true self acts spontaneously without thinking and reasoning and planning." Nonetheless, for all his attempts at rapprochement between the two traditions, Johnston acknowledges that Christians cannot identify their own experience of God with Buddhists, experience of satori (insight or enlightenment) or nirvana (the cessation of suffering). Christian enlightenment, based on the gospel, remains irreducibly different from Zen or any other form of Buddhism. Johnston underscores the radical transcendence of God for Christians, including Christian mystics who use the language of nonduality. The climax of the Christian mystical journey is identifying with the Son and being filled with the Spirit and crying out: "Abba, Father!" At least on the level of expression and religious self-understanding, this is very different from Buddhist perspectives on nonduality, which do not address a transcendent in personal terms. Johnston supports the practice of Christians who learn meditation practice from Zen monks but do not call their practice Zen."

Thich Nhat Hanh, by contrast, views such distinctions as themselves preliminary and unimportant. For him, Buddhist and Christian concepts differ, but direct experience is the same. Nhat Hanh expresses his understanding of this issue partly in response to Pope John Paul II's remarks concerning Buddhism in Crossing the Threshold of Hope - remarks that were perceived by many Buddhists as misleading and even insulting.

Nhat Hanh interprets John Paul II's statement that "the pope prays as the Holy Spirit permits him to pray" at being equivalent to the Buddhist practice of mindfulness: "For me, the Holy Spirit is mindfulness itself." While Nhat Hanh applauds the popes prayers for and with those who suffer, he draws a radically different conclusion. For Nhat Hanh, embracing requires us to surrender dogmas "that constitute obstacles for working toward the cessation of the suffering.

After urging the pope to abandon all dogmas, Nhat Hanh proceeds to instruct the pontiff on Christology and trinitarian theology. He quotes John Paul II's insistence that Jesus is the only Son of God and is unique among the religious leaders of humankind, and protests that the popes claim "does not reflect the deep mystery of the oneness of the Trinity. It also does not reflect the fact that Christ is also the Son of Man."

Nhat Hanh understands the uniqueness of Christ as being on the same level as the uniqueness of every other human being. According to the principle of nonduality, all beings are not other than the timeless, the unconditioned, thus all who are enlightened can say: "Before Abraham came to be, I am."

In this perspective, the Trinity exemplifies nonduality, baptism expresses our common capacity to manifest the qualities of being a Buddha or a child of God, the Holy Spirit is mindfulness, resurrection and reincarnation are assimilated to each other, and all dogmas are inherently suspect as causing division. Nhat Hanh rejects the pope's affirmation that Christianity is the only way of salvation: "This attitude excludes dialogue and fosters religious intolerance and discrimination. It does not help." Nhat Hanh blames lack of genuine experience for the intolerance that has plagued religious history.

Nhat Hanh's central message is to breathe with mindfulness, to be attentive to the present moment and allow the deep wisdom and peace within us to unfold. He offers very concrete and helpful strategies for addressing and overcoming conflicts within and without. His reflections on Buddhist wisdom in Living Buddha, Living Christ recapitulate his numerous other writings. There is a profoundly healing wisdom in Nhat Hanh's reflections on meditation and living

in the present, and Christians have much to learn from his rich experience.

Nonetheless, one wonders whether Nhat Hanh has really encountered the distinctive features of Christian faith. As he takes up Christian themes and recasts them in light of Buddhist perspectives on nonduality, the otherness of the God who appears in Jesus Christ disappears. Christological and trinitarian affirmations that were forged to express the uniqueness of the Christ-event are interpreted as examples of the experience of everyone. Nhat Hanh ends up presenting a very Buddhist version of Christianity, one which many Christians would not find faithful to their tradition.

For Johnston, the wisdom of John of the Cross is fully comparable to the paradoxes of the Heart Sutra, but he notes that John of the Cross interpreted the paradoxes in light of a Thomistic metaphysics: God is all; the creature is nothing. He finds a Christian nondualism in John of the Cross's principle that the just person is a law unto himself, but he recognizes the difference between Buddhist and Christian expressions of nonduality. He expresses the hope: "Can we, then, see a beautiful similarity between compassionate, dynamic sunyata and a Father who so loved the world as to give his only son? Can the Buddhist and the Christian join hands and lead one another to transcendental wisdom?" Johnston wants to preserve the uniqueness of each religion and also find a common ground for learning from one another. It is only after realizing that Christianity and Buddhism are not the same that we can see ways in which they may not be different.