

## Zen and Christianity, how can they fully be combined?

Last January I became ordained as a priest in the Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands. Before this, I completed a master's degree in Catholic Theology and on top of that, I followed the ecclesiastical priestly training. I evidently am a Catholic in heart and soul and yet I have also been a Zen monk in Roland's sangha for more than 20 years with conviction. I have been able to enjoy Rolands teachings and reap the benefits of them all this time. I sometimes call myself a Buddhistic Catholic. Since my ordination as a catholic priest, the question arises more and more often how I combine both traditions. This writing can be seen as a small step towards an answer to that question. Since I am not the only one who combines the practice of Zen with a Christian conviction and praxis, I hope that this writing can be of use to others.

For me, it's important to take both traditions seriously. I don't do 'cherry picking' by which I mean that I don't only take of Roland's teachings what suits me well and fits nicely into my Christian, Catholic thinking. Having said that, I will not be able to cover all the issues here.

Meditation and retreat are no strangers to Christianity. On the contrary, Christ regularly withdrew into the mountains or the desert, as we read in several places in the Bible. Early Christianity had a rich tradition of men and women who withdrew into the desert to be with God in silence. Jesus did not always succeed in being alone and the first monks who wanted to live in silence also attracted followers. This is how the first Christian monasteries soon came into being. A life focused on space for God and prayer, working with peace and regularity and with attention is still the core of monastic life today. That's not much different than we do during a sesshin. The big difference seems to be in being focused on God in Christian meditation. Seemingly, but I'll come back to that later.

Praying and becoming silent, the meditation itself is as old as Christianity, although we unfortunately we have lost a bit. Church services are full of singing and most churchgoers get restless from a half-minute silent prayer. Zazen has made me familiar with the silence where we can find God. What zazen brings me as a Christian transcends words and is difficult to grasp in words. Moreover, I would not be doing zazen justice if I were to practice it because it brings something. Still, zazen gives gifts, as I like to call it. The practice helps me to be more present. It helps to stay with what is and to bring body and mind together and sometimes it brings me to be completely present in the here and now. Sometimes it brings the experience of connectedness and interdependence of all with everything and in it with God. I can also deal better with the fact that everything is always changing.

A great strength of Buddhism is that there is room for all living beings. To me, this corrects a certain and somewhat old-fashioned Christian interpretation of humankind's place in creation. In Christianity, humankind has become very central. Humans were seen as the crown of creation and the rest of the world became its domain. The Bible makes that interpretation possible, however at the same time you can also say: 'that is not what it says'. It is an interpretation that has made possible a use of the world by us humans. It is, therefore, an interpretation that is not doing any good to Gods creation. We see more and more church leaders correcting this image and giving a different place to creation and the place of mankind in it. In zazen we can experience that we are connected to everything and that all of creation is mutually dependent on each other. That experience, in addition to a different way of reading the Bible, is important for a much-needed correction to a harmful view of mankind and the whole creation.

I would come back to God, because that is the core point on which Zen Buddhism and Christianity part. Yes, it is. At the same time, there is a good theological argument to be made that makes this separation less significant than it seems. I don't want to sweep that difference under the carpet, at the same time I think a lot comes down to the question of who God is.

Long before all detergents, God was already three in one. Christian thinking about God speaks of God as three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) while at the same time God is one. It may well be that Buddhists have a better understanding than Christians how three persons can be one. God is relationship in itself, since He is three-in-one. God does not stand alone, God is connectedness. God can be understood as the absolute reality that we can and may sometimes see and experience when we feel connected.

That God is trinitarian (three in one) is a concept. The whole of Christian thought is conceptual and philosophical thinking about God. A philosophical framework has been built to be able to say something about 'He who is ineffable'. In the Old Testament, God calls Himself "I am who is." God is also called the highest or deepest 'being'. He is origin and purpose of our existence yet cannot be put into words. All the words are therefore inadequate. The theologian Hans Küng once said: 'a God who exists, does not exist'. In other words, the moment someone thinks they have been able to capture God in words, then it is no longer God. You can't capture Him in words or concepts. Who says God is a "he" in the first place? We can only talk about God with our human speech and our human imagination. We cannot grasp it, any more than we can grasp Buddhature. Perhaps God and Buddhature are the same thing. Maybe it's two fingers pointing at the same moon.

When we talk about God, we often think first of the first person of the three: God the Father. God the Father is the creator, the Old Testament God who can get angry, sympathize, feel and judge. God the Father is also called the God of the Last Judgment, who is quickly associated with the one of hell and damnation. God the Father is both the cause and the fixer, it is the one who gives meaning to life. Of the three, God the Father is perhaps the one furthest from Zen Buddhism. It is this person who makes Christianity the main road for me personally and Zen Buddhism an important sidetrack. Buddhism assumes cause and effect. There is no bigger plan behind it, no goal, no direction, and in my opinion, no sense either. In Christianity we struggle with the phenomenon of 'when bad things happen to good people' precisely because we believe that there must be a meaning in it somewhere. The question of an almighty God who allows bad things to happen is an unsolvable question and a struggle that, logically, leads many away from Christianity. It is an art to stand in the tension that a God of love allows so much evil. Bookshelves full of books have been written about it and the Bible also knows the book of Job which revolves around exactly this question. Yet it is the ultimate meaning or at least a sense of purpose of our lives that I, as a Christian, miss in Zen Buddhism. I experience karma, cause and effect as cold and distant. Maybe I didn't understand the teaching correctly, I certainly don't rule that out. The reality is that everything is always changing. In zazen this is clearly observable, and that makes it easier to accept that everything is indeed changing again and again, and everything is unstable. That's an insight I really owe to zazen. In combination with my Christian belief that there is meaning and direction in that change, I have also learned to trust that those changes are good, even if I experience it as the opposite. In this way I have learned to trust more deeply in 'what is, is good'.

The absolute, deeper reality, like God, is elusive. Experiential, but elusive. We however have made human concepts of God: we speak of three persons, we can talk to God the Father as Christ taught us, we can lay down our worries and transfer them and then also very zen: let go. Our worries, questions, but also our gratitude, anger and sorrow have an addressee: God. We can be grateful for something to someone, we can be angry about a situation of powerlessness against someone.

Trusting in God that it has a purpose, that it has a meaning. Trusting the practice that everything needed is at hand. Christianity and Zen Buddhism have confidence in common in this respect. What we rely on seems different, but at the bottom we trust in absolute reality, no matter how we interpret it.

The least known of the three persons who is God is probably the Holy Spirit. It is also called the breath of God, which blows where it will. It is the breath of God that gives life that inspires and is giving spirit. It is also a feminine word and for many She represents the feminine side of God. We can feel God's Breath within us when we turn inward. There, in the silence of our hearts, we can experience it just as much as in the passion we can feel when we feel inspired, giving the spirit. The Holy Spirit can set us on fire, ignite our passion. Inspiration also comes from the Holy Spirit, literally in-spiritus. It is this person of God who perhaps comes closest to what we mean when we speak of the Buddha nature. When I write above that

we can encounter God in silence and in zazen, for me it is first and foremost the Holy Spirit, the breath of God. It is for me the higher, deeper, or absolute reality that can be found in all living beings.

Finally, Jesus, the historical figure who was at the same time God and of whom we now speak as Christ. Jesus is God who wanted to become one with us, who wanted to be so close to us that He became us. He lived with us and for us and died as consequence of how he lived. He rose as a sign that death and evil do not have the last word. In the Eucharist, bread and wine become His body and blood. In this way He draws close to us again and again, in this way He becomes one with us and we with Him and through Him with each other.

Talking about Christ also brings us to talking about salvation. What is salvation in a Christian view? There are several answers to this question. Forgiveness of our sins, thanks to Christ, is one possible answer. This brings us to the notion that Christ died for us so that our sins can be forgiven. But that does place a very strong emphasis on his death in relation to his life and resurrection.

In the Middle Ages, the image of heaven and hell emerged. They are interpretations of the biblical talk about 'the last of things' and 'the Kingdom of God', but neither heaven nor hell appear in the Bible in the way they have been presented for centuries. The biblical discourse is more about righting wrongs than it is about hell and damnation and reaching heaven. Thinking about heaven and hell is still part of the popular devotion and can therefore certainly be taken seriously, but they are not to be found in the Bible. In Catholic thought, there is no I that is redeemed. We are redeemed. It's not about my actions that make me deserve heaven or hell (as a punishment). We are each other's brother and keeper. It is very Catholic to say: we are not available separately from the other.

A possible answer to what salvation is, is the communion in the body of Christ. This is a point of view that is close to my heart. The body of Christ consists of different members, each with its own function and individuality, but at the same time each part is essential to the whole body. Christ is the head of that body, there is direction in it. This is where Christianity differs from what I have understood from Zen teachings. There is purpose, there is direction in this interdependence, in being connected to each other in community. Conservative Christian thinking will tend to limit the body of Christ to the church, or rather to those who have converted to Christ and call themselves Christians. At the same time, it is up to Christ, not us, to determine who does and does not belong to His body.

Just like in Zen, we have a relative reality and an absolute one, only in Christianity we talk about an 'already' and 'not yet'. We are already redeemed, we are already connected, we are already one in Christ. At the same time, this is not yet fully present in daily life. In the words of the great Catholic theologian and songwriter Huub Oosterhuis: 'Seeing, sometimes for a while'.

Sitting on a cushion, with the back straight, the chin tucked in and concentrating on the breathing, we can experience that, that 'Seeing, sometimes for a moment'. Is that God? Is that Buddha nature? What is it?

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