

Who is my mother, who is my brother?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 10 September 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Ms Helen Sanderson

Pentecost 14A

Romans 13: 8-14; Interfaith Reading: “*To study the Buddha way...*”

Dogen Kigen 1200-1253; Contemporary Reading:

“*Please call me by my true names*”, Thich Nhat Hanh, July 2015

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Reflections” tab

Today I’m going to talk about my practice of Zen Buddhism and I would like to start by thanking my Zen teachers Subhana Barzaghi and Gilly Coote who I consulted when thinking about this reflection.

In Zen we have the precept: *I take up the way of not speaking falsely*. Not speaking falsely means not preaching a single word. So – here I am, about to say a great many words!

When I was a child my father insisted that I could talk underwater or as the saying went talk the leg of an iron pot. So what led me into a path where words are often inadequate and silence is the best response.

There were 4 questions I was interested in thinking about this reflection.

1. What led me to taking the path of Zen?
2. As a Christian what conflict did I feel practising Zen?
3. What do I find nourishing in Zen?
4. And what do the two traditions, Christianity and Zen have in common?

(Margaret Mayman: *So, Helen, what led you on this path of Zen?*)

As a young person at school and university I was like many, I expect, influenced by evangelical Christianity. I grew up in the Billy Graham era, though my mother wouldn’t let me attend his rallies because she felt they would brainwash us. I became fundamentalist anyway - and was sure I knew what was true. Youth is the age of knowing everything. If it appeared in the bible and went along with what the teachers at the church said, it must be true. Anyone who did not agree with that version was most likely going to hell.

Some of my nearest and dearest fell into that category (including my very devout grandmother – she didn’t believe in that sort of thing). For a while I prayed earnestly that people like that would be saved. But then I decided that it was a cruel and stupid belief and if they were going to hell then to hell with it all, that’s where I’d rather go.

I decided that truth, with a capital T, was much less certain or clear than I had originally believed. And so I began a search of other traditions, which included new age thought and Hindu Vedanta teaching. I decided that what a person believed was more likely to be an accident of geography - where you lived - than actually a testable truth. I thought that many of the world religions, especially those with a meditation tradition, would have much in common.

I went to several meditation groups and maintained a meditation practice. All the while, I kept up coming to church because I felt this was my authentic tradition. About 7 years ago I was working as an art therapist and, in art therapy as in other psychology kind of professions, we have to have a supervisor. I was talking with my supervisor about meditation and how I wanted to deepen my practise and she, as a Buddhist teacher, suggested I try Zen. And that's what I did.

(Margaret Mayman: So, did you have difficulties in reconciling the 2 traditions?)

I certainly did. Initially I felt disloyal to my Christian tradition. And also, during zazen (which is the formal sitting meditation session), we chant:

I take refuge in the Buddha

I take refuge in the Dharma' (which is the teaching)

I take refuge in the Sangha (which is the community) - then we bow like this - prostration.

This all felt very foreign. Originally I used to change the words in my head to:

I take refuge in the Christ, I take refuge in the bible, I take refuge in the church.

But, after a while, I realized that no one at Sydney Zen was trying to make me give up my Christian tradition. I also understood that what was important was the present moment. In Zen we have an expression: *things are exactly as they are.*

While I was in the Buddhist temple I could follow that tradition; and while in the church follow the Christian tradition. By the same token, Pitt St people did not condemn me for following a Buddhist practice. I came to the point of view that the truth about God and religion is a mystery, as is the truth about who I am. Sometimes at Zen I will talk about Pitt St and people will ask me if I am a Christian and I will say: *I don't really know.* I told my Zen teacher this and she said she didn't know what she was either. What is the nature of self and who I am is a big Zen question. Not only Zen but I suspect it's universal.

In Zen, there's a lot of bowing and prostration in a meditation session. It is part of the ritual. At first I also found that confronting. So un-Australian I thought. We don't bow to anyone! Definitely un-protestant. I grew up in the Presbyterian Church, and the most bowing we did was this. Only the Catholics kneeled down, we thought. Actually, I found out later that the Anglicans do too. I got over my horror of such bodily humility because it was explained that it is a sign of respect, not servility. Anyway, in Zen, it's very good to move your body, because there is a lot of sitting still.

(Margaret Mayman: *Helen, how does Zen nourish you?*)

I find the practice of Zen quite austere and quite difficult, but also nourishing.

It is an old tradition dating back to 9th century AD – coming out of China and Japan. The earliest Zen sage Bodhidharma allegedly spent years facing a wall before becoming enlightened.

So at a meditation session which is known as *zazen* there is a period of chanting and bowing and bell ringing, all quite formal, followed by three 25 minute periods of sitting facing the wall.

In between these times there is walking meditation. These days I'm not very good at sitting on the floor – my back aches. So I sit in a chair instead of a cushion. But the really major challenge, apart from my body, is my mind, which jumps around.

However having 3 periods of meditation is helpful because by the third one, my mind has come down a little bit and it's quieter. During these sitting periods there is an opportunity to have a private interview with the teacher in which the student can talk about their meditation practice. When I have an interview with the teacher it is a time of honesty and kindness. My teacher recently reminded me of a practice that is perfect for me as it gives my busy mind a variety of thoughts and words to hang on to - or better still, let go of.

I thought, to break up this talk, we could do that practice now. I need to step off this

This is a meditation which was recommended by Thich Nhat Hanh. He used the bell to remind people to return to a place of quiet within themselves, to come back home as it were. So I thought we'd have the bell too. I just ask you all to just sit comfortably. Usually, if you can manage it, it's best to have your back fairly straight and your hands resting comfortably in your lap. If you feel like it, you might like to close your eyes. I will ring the bell to start and talk us through it:

I am aware that I am breathing in
I am aware that I am breathing out.

I am aware that I am breathing in
I am aware that I am breathing out.

In out, in out, in out, in out.

Breathing in I breathe deep,
Breathing out I breathe slow

Breathing in I breathe deep,
Breathing out I breathe slow.

Deep slow, deep slow, deep slow.

Breathing in I feel calm,
Breathing out I feel ease.

Breathing in I feel calm,
Breathing out I feel ease.

Calm ease, calm ease.

Breathing in I smile, breathing out I release.
Breathing in I smile, breathing out I release.

Smile release, smile release.

Breathing in I know that I am in the present moment,
Breathing out I know this is a wonderful moment.

Breathing in I know that I am in the present moment,
Breathing out I know this is a wonderful moment.

Present moment, wonderful moment, present moment, wonderful moment.

I find the meditation practice intimate. I become intimate with my mind, with all its frustrating habits. I come to understand my need to be kind to myself and my mind and not berate it. (Mind you, I did a lot of berating on the way here today.)

Some people do breath meditation. They become intimate with their breath and its quality.

Some may do a loving kindness meditation. This consists of words like: *May I have loving kindness for myself. May I be well, may I be happy may I be liberated in this very life.*

And some do koan work. They concentrate on a question for which there is no logical answer like "*What is the sound of one hand clapping*", or "*Who is hearing that sound?*" A Christian koan might be,

"In the beginning was the word. What is the word?" Meditators live with the koan or question till the koan inhabits them. All these are ways of becoming enlightened or realizing the nature of life.

Then, after the sitting, when there is so much formality, everyone enjoys a cup of tea and a chat. It seems that the process of meditation, when so much that is inessential drops away, promotes intimacy and often light-heartedness among the community of meditators. This is one of the great pleasures of the practice.

(Margaret Mayman: *Helen, what common ground do you see in the two traditions that you follow?*)

I see both traditions as threads. On the table, I put two threads of ribbons, one coming out of the Christ image and one coming out of the Buddha image. Sometimes they intersect and sometimes they're separate.

Both the Christian Community at Pitt St and the Zen community understand the fact that all of life is interconnected. So both traditions are concerned with the environment and social justice - issues like refugees and marriage equality. I think, often when there are demonstrations, there's a community of Zen and Pitt St people, all at the same event.

Both traditions recognize the need to express goodness. In Zen we say: *apart from the community there is no Buddha*. When Jesus said: *I am the vine and you are the branches*, he said much the same thing. Thich Nhat Hanh the great Vietnamese teacher suggested that the act of mindfulness is similar in effect to the healing qualities of the Holy Spirit.

There are theological differences. Buddhism does not have God as a foundation. It does posit the central idea of emptiness. It is emptiness in the heart of everything into which everything flows. Maybe this idea also presents itself in the Christian meditation practice, I'm not sure, but I think it could.

Christianity often suggests that suffering is a result of sin. Whereas Buddhism does not refer to sin, it does see that suffering is caused by attachment to a particular outcome and also by the practice of greed, hatred and ignorance.

Some Buddhists believe in reincarnation, but at Sydney Zen, as at Pitt St, not a lot of attention is paid to questions of life after death. Buddhists have the *Metta* or loving kindness practice and Christians know they should love their neighbour as themselves.

I find much benefit in either practice and can only talk about the specific ones I go to: Sydney Zen Community and Pitt St Uniting Church. These days when I am at Zen, that's what I do. And when I'm at Pitt St, that's the practise I engage in. It is a case of present moment wonderful moment.

I love both practices and communities and consider myself to be doubly blessed in having not one but two spiritual homes.