

The Awakened Heart

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It was a grey Friday afternoon in October 2005 when I arrived at Park Place Pastoral Centre run by the Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of St. Mary of the Angels. The centre is open to people of all faiths or none. I had come to experience my first retreat with other members of the Awakened Heart Sangha; "A community of practitioners training in and transmitting the heart essence teachings of the Buddha," (Course Companion). The theme of the retreat "Spontaneous Activity from Outside Time."

The Awakened Heart Sangha has a long and respected lineage of teachers dating from the time of the historical Buddha through Guru Rinpoche who was believed to have conveyed the teachings of the Buddha to Tibet in the eighth century AD. The Sangha teaches Buddhism in general and the Dzogchen tradition in particular.

For many years I have had an interest in Buddhism particularly Theravada Buddhism. Approximately 18 months ago I participated in a Christian / Buddhist meditation retreat held at Sarum College. The retreat was led by a former Catholic nun who now lives near and works for The Awakened Heart Sangha.

Since then I have been slowly working my way through some of the course material produced by the Sangha and I attended my first retreat with other members of the community. I do not consider myself an expert on Christianity or Buddhism, and when it comes to Dzogchen I am a complete beginner. However I would like to share some thoughts on the insights and experiences I have gained from my explorations and how they nourish my life as a Christian and friar.

I cannot remember where I came across the following, "God's centre is everywhere. His circumference is nowhere." Openness or spaciousness is a significant precept taught by the Sangha; a principle that has begun to lead me towards a wider vision of God. This is not simply head knowledge; it is also personal experience based on a willingness to be open-minded and have my own assumptions and practices challenged.

Two simple examples of how my own meditation practice has changed: I have always meditated sitting cross-legged with my eyes closed and hands resting in my lap. It was suggested that I might like to try and sit with my hands resting on my thighs and the eyes neither shut nor fully open. In his book *Openness, Clarity, Sensitivity*, Rigdzin Shikpo explains the symbolism associated with this posture. "When you sit cross-legged with your eyes open and your arms out, there is nothing in front of you, so there is no protection. This expresses openness. There is a sense of being united with the environment and space: the opposite of closing off. The hands are not across the body which could symbolise an attempt to defend or protect yourself. Having them out, open, on the knees, expresses spaciousness."

Another reflective exercise I was encouraged to practise at various times was to gently explore the sense of space; to ask where is the boundary, where is the centre? Can anything be truly boundless?

These seem such simple things yet I return to them time and again. It took my Buddhist friends to remind me of and reawaken me to the experience that "God's centre is everywhere, his circumference nowhere" and of the need to sit quietly, open and vulnerable before God.

The Awakened Heart:

"You open your awareness and your heart to God, the ultimate mystery, who dwells in the depth of your being, beyond the reach of the mind." (Father Thomas Keating)

I had the tendency to see God as the Father in heaven, somewhere up there existing outside of myself; it seems many Christians have this tendency. In his book *The New Creation In Christ*, Bede Griffiths highlights this in the following story about Father Jules Monchanin. "For many years he was a parish priest in Tannirpalli in Southern India. One day he approached a group of children and asked them, Where is God? The Hindu children pointed to the heart and said, God was there. The Christians pointed up to the sky." These are two different ways of understanding God and they are complementary.

Many Western thinkers and theologians demonstrate a bias towards the mind and rational thinking at the expense of the heart. It is as if the heart is always associated with irrationality or sentimentality and cannot be trusted. Buddhism seems to take a very different view. "The whole Buddhist tradition is based on the belief that we have within our being, within our heart, an awake quality, an inner wisdom which expresses itself as warmth and gentleness." (*Discovering The Heart of Buddhism*).

It is often said that the longest journey is from the head to the heart, and what a torturous journey that can be; there needs to be a restoration of the path that separates them. As meditation practice deepens we re-discover that the heart and mind are not separate entities. There are many examples in scripture where the heart not the head or mind seems to be the centre of thought (1 Chronicles 29:18; Mark 2:6; Luke 2:19). Through awareness practice I have been encouraged to embrace all the qualities of heart and mind; as Shenpen (director of the community) says Both wisdom and compassion are heart and mind together."

Finally my encounter with Buddhism encourages my Christian life by offering challenges to my faith, to my theological understanding and ways of thinking. I am sometimes asked, "Are you a Christian or a Buddhist?" The answer is never easy. I know that I must point to Christ as the way of salvation; it is what I know and have found to be true. Whatever faith we are committed to, Christian, Buddhist, or Islam, the challenge is to live out our faith without dismissing the other great religions by which others have sought to know and love God.

I remain rooted in my Christian faith where I have found salvation, healing and fullness of life in Christ. Yet it is a joy to respectfully listen to and share in conversation with others who have found salvation, healing and fullness of life in Buddhism, Islam or any of the great traditions. There are no limits to the saving power of God; the Spirit will lead us to a fuller understanding over time.

"We do not want to be beginners, but let us be convinced that we will never be anything else but beginners all our life." (Thomas Merton)

On Sunday during the retreat sitting in the meditation room with my new Buddhist friends, listening to my Roman Catholic brothers and sisters singing the Mass in the chapel next door, I recall Shenpen's words "At least we are all on the road; some haven't started yet." We are on the road, members of different faiths sometimes travelling together, sometimes apart, but always beginners. f