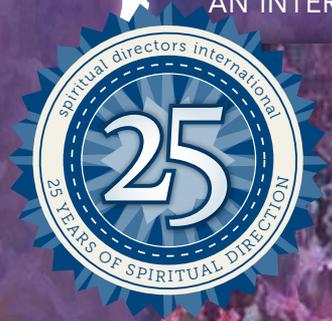


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Landscapes of Contemporary Spiritual Direction in Australia • From the Center to the Edge  
Spiritual Direction and the Call to Ecological Conversion • Letting God Be God

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## Buddhist Wisdom for Christian Spiritual Directors

Becky Van Ness

Listening deeply to another person's religious tradition can lead us to rediscover the wisdom inherent in our own tradition. Fresh language that speaks of the human spiritual journey from a new perspective can enrich old, familiar practices and understandings. As director of a formation program for spiritual directors, I find that Buddhist concepts and practices have deepened my own understanding of spiritual direction and of the process of spiritual maturation evident in the students I teach.

Building bridges of relationship between traditions is the goal of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) in the United States. Together with Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique (DIM) in Europe, this group works under the aegis of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in Rome, Italy. Gethsemani Encounter IV in May 2015 brought together Buddhist and Benedictine monastics for heart-to-heart exchanges at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Trappist, Kentucky, USA. Paired presentations—Buddhist and Christian—set the stage for small-group discussions and countless informal exchanges. I was honored to be a nonmonastic presenter on the event's theme of spiritual maturity. What follows are the observations I contributed to this Buddhist-Christian dialogue as the director of a Christian spiritual direction formation and training program.

The spiritual direction program at Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary in Collegeville, Minnesota, USA, rooted in the Benedictine tradition, focuses on content themes that are intentionally Benedictine: *lectio divina* applied to life, hospitality, *conversatio morum* (conversion of life), and stability. In working to develop a flow to these themes, Buddhist concepts have deepened my understanding of the ways in which spiritual director interns are invited to grow in spiritual maturity.

### Christian Spiritual Direction: Accepting God's Invitation to Live in Contemplative Presence

Training to be a spiritual companion is not unlike monastic formation, in that participants prepare for a way of life (the real meaning of vocation) more than for

a profession. No official certification of spiritual directors exists, at least in the United States, yet an informal consensus unites spiritual directors in the belief that to practice spiritual direction means to practice contemplative presence.

In the context of contemporary Christian spiritual direction, one might describe contemplative presence as the aspiration to be present to another as God is present to each of us, in this way "to be holy as God is holy." The word *aspiration* underscores that in the end, contemplative presence is a gift, a grace to which we open ourselves, and not an achievement. Contemplative presence is reverent attention to whatever or whomever is before us, absorption in awareness of that person or event. Thomas Merton described this in *The Inner Experience*: "The contemplative is not one who directs a magic spiritual intuition upon other objects, but one who ... enters into contact with reality by an immediacy that forgets the division between subject and object" (151–52). Implicit in this passage is the notion that contemplative presence is not only the result of spiritual maturation; contemplative presence is itself a path leading to a spiritually mature relationship with an infinitely loving God.

Just as language can open us to notice and more fully savor our own spiritual experiences, training in listening skills can increase the capacity to notice God's presence in a session by taking in the experience of a spiritual directee. True spiritual maturity requires accepting and even welcoming this growth in receptivity as a lifelong process. For this reason, the theme for our students' internship year is *conversatio morum*, or continual conversion. Whether or not they ever formally offer spiritual direction, students say this process of spiritual formation opens them to greater awareness of God's presence in all of life.

The Buddhist tradition offers fresh language to express the dynamics of becoming present to whatever a spiritual directee shares. I will offer three signs of spiritual maturation from Buddhist psychology that have been invaluable to me as director of this formation in contemplative presence. Each of these insights has brought new depth to what one studies theologically as "Christian anthropol-



ogy.” For each of the three related insights, I will offer a Buddhist statement in very down-to-earth terms, paired with a statement from the Christian tradition.

**You do not exist the way you think you do.**  
**(Buddhism: no-self)**

**It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. (Gal 2:20)**  
**(Christianity: interior freedom)**

Although Christian tradition does not emphasize the letting go of self as a spiritual practice in the same way that Buddhism does, the idea of Christ within highlights how ego can interfere with spiritual commitment. Due to this different emphasis, students in the high-school world religions class that I used to teach needed some careful preparation for the Buddhist concept of “no-self.” First, I would ask students to put the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths in everyday language that would make sense if they were talking with their peers. They usually concluded that human pain becomes suffering when instead of accepting the “unsatisfactoriness” of life, we struggle to control life, unsuccessfully trying to get life the way we want it and then keep it that way.

This naturally would lead to a discussion of the three characteristics of existence:

Impermanence: Nothing is static or fixed, all is fleeting.

No-self: Cells change; thoughts and emotions rise and fall continuously.

Suffering: Pain and dissatisfaction are inevitable parts of living.

I suggested that *no-self* is a deliberately shocking expression, almost a kind of *koan* meant to shake up our thinking, to jolt us out of the habitual way we tend to see self as a fixed reality, as a reliable frame of reference for all we experience. I asked the students if we could at least seriously consider how impermanent we are as a personality, how we constantly change even though at any moment we feel as if we are a solid, fixed personality. Perhaps, I suggested, it would be helpful to restate this third characteristic of life: “You do not exist the way you think you do.”

This theme has carried over to my work with students in formation to become spiritual directors. In class, we reflect on our gradual growth in the interior freedom of heart and mind to say yes to an increasingly intimate relationship with God. We reflect on how hard it is to let go of ego, the false self, since we so strongly identify with our personal preferences, our disordered attachments, and our pre-formed opinions. One meaning of interior freedom is to be able to acknowledge our emotions, feel them, and reflect on them without becoming hooked, without being carried away by waves of compulsive reaction, without numbing out in an attempt to evade what we do not want to accept.

In the Rule of Benedict, the practice of manifestation of thoughts to another is one of the ways to grow in self-honesty, to accept the changing reality of who we are at any moment rather than getting lost in defense of who we think we are or who we would like to be. Through this process, we can grow in the interior freedom to acknowledge our emotions, feel them, and reflect on them without becoming hooked into habitual patterns of reaction.

This discipline of radical self-honesty has been a tough asceticism ever since the desert mothers and fathers of early Christianity. Few students fully realize when they apply for our program that they will be challenged to stop clinging to their heavily defended, habitual identities. During the practicum year, one-on-one supervision with a seasoned spiritual director helps students relax fixed notions of who they are. Gradually they open up to a growing interior freedom to be present to spiritual directees as God is present in their lived experience. The supervisor helps the student spiritual director uncover any unfreedom that may have arisen during a particular spiritual direction session, which may have affected their ability to be present to a directee.

The vulnerability of this radical self-honesty has the potential to open both the supervisor and the student spiritual director to a lived encounter with Christ, who is always present as the real supervisor, as the real spiritual director. The in-dwelling of Christ can be described as a sense of the intermingling of nature and grace, of self and God that can arise at times of prayer and then increasingly during spiritual direction. As the apostle Paul said, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Ga 2:20). Even to begin this transformation is a giant step toward greater interior freedom.



“Desert of the Beloved” — Jan Richardson



**Drop the story and find the feeling. (see Chödron)**  
**(Buddhism: mindfulness)**

**Stay with the inner movement.**  
**(Christianity: sacrament of the present moment)**

I recall the first time I heard a Buddhist practitioner say that meditation brought a sense that “the story drops away.” I was puzzled. Yet that moment planted a seed of insight in me, eventually leading to a deeper understanding of what it means to be contemplatively present to each moment of life.

Years of emotional investment give our habitual life stories a compelling energy, no matter how deluded the stories. Thoughts like those that make up our stories can be powerful carriers of emotion, even when—or perhaps especially when—they do not reflect our more immediate experience in the moment. Buddhism helped me realize the wisdom of “opening the hand of thought.” This fresh expression of a deep truth awakened me to the wisdom of the Christian ascetic tradition in warning against naively giving our consciousness over to thoughts.

In spiritual direction, we listen for “interior movements,” namely the deeper emotions, inclinations, desires, and feelings that lie behind thoughts. Thoughts by themselves can be exciting, even captivating, regardless of their spiritual quality. That is why we turn our attention to the interior movements behind the thoughts in order to discern the source. Without a healthy suspicion concerning the truthfulness of our thoughts in reflecting reality, we might be beguiled to act compulsively and without awareness, blindly taking steps to avoid pain or increase pleasure. When the compulsion drops away, we are freer to be in a relationship with God rather than under the power of our often-deluded thoughts and the unexamined emotions that accompany them.

The listening skills students practice before they start actual spiritual direction are disciplines of attention. These listening skills are spiritual disciplines since they help spiritual directors become contemplatively present to the experience of those they companion, offering a listening that more and more mirrors God’s deep listening. Benedict would say these skills of “staying with” help us be less distracted by our thoughts about life, and he would suggest that we “listen ... [with] the ear of your heart” (Benedict of Nursia, 4). The phrase “the sacrament

of the present moment” (which is also the English title of the classic book by Jean-Pierre de Caussade) expresses the possibility for an encounter with God, a true sacrament that is available each moment if only we accept the invitation.

**Cultivate loving-kindness with oneself and all beings.**  
**(Buddhism: loving-kindness)**

**Abide in loving relationship with self, others, and God.**  
**(Christianity: Trinitarian love)**

The Buddhist idea of friendship with oneself may appear to suggest something akin to self-esteem. Instead, this phrase offers a new way of understanding the radical relationality that lies at the heart of Christian teachings on the Trinity.

Only recently did I realize how widespread the criticism of the old self-esteem movement is. Self-esteem is like a drug for which we have an insatiable need, leading to the inevitable pain of withdrawal when not available. In contrast, offering ourselves the compassion we give others is a better way to relate to ourselves. Here, too, I was prepared for this new perspective by having become familiar with the concept of Buddhist compassion (*metta* in Pali or *maitri* in Sanskrit) as friendliness and loving-kindness toward all beings *and* oneself. Later it came to me that practicing loving-kindness toward self is yet another way to be holy as God is holy, based on a spiritual understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity.

The forces within that work against self-compassion lose power when we simply notice them, rather than either blindly obeying them or attempting to suppress them. André Louf, a Trappist monk, was known for his wise integration of spirituality and psychology. In his book *Grace Can Do More*, he wrote that we all carry an “inner policeman” within, a harshly critical voice that admonishes us to be good, to follow the rules. We also carry an “inner mirror,” which we constantly check to see if we are living up to an ideal we have internalized (see chapters 6 and 7). We each have a psychological preference for either the policeman or the mirror, no matter how firmly we might deny that fact. Humility frees us to accept that these voices speak within, demanding our attention. Humility invites us to accept that as humans we embody a complex mix of the psychological and spiri-



tual. Denial of this reality can only lead to the eruption within of these voices that we may have repressed but can never silence.

Christian tradition offers a wonderful way to understand why and how we can better relate to those troublesome inner selves. The reason self-compassion is a spiritual discipline can be stated in terms of relationship, theologically in Trinitarian terms. The theology of the Trinity expresses the mystery that God's very being is defined by love, by loving relationship of selves within God's unity of being. As the image or reflection of God, we humans embody a communion of selves, some of those selves conscious and some not. As we grow in wisdom, these many selves increasingly come into loving relationship with each other. Of course, the energy of this truly wholesome love, this self-compassion, spills out into the world, just as the communion that exists within God spills out in divine love for the world.

Participation in this Trinitarian love helps spiritual directors embody God's loving presence for those we companion. Our participation in this love also enables us to draw closer to that deep space within where we can glimpse, no matter how imperfectly, the non-duality of the human and the divine, of Christ alive within. Why would anyone resist the offer of this communion, this sense of the Holy drawing near?

#### **Discussion: Resistance to Growing in Spiritual Maturity Is No Surprise**

After offering these three-paired signs of spiritual maturation at this Gethsemani Encounter, I moved into a topic designed to open discussion in small groups of our lived experiences seeking spiritual growth ourselves

and in those we guide. Introducing the concept of resistance, I asked us to consider how our traditions, Buddhist and Christian, deal with the inevitable human difficulties in accepting spiritual growth.

*Resistance*, as the word is used in spiritual direction, refers to the reluctance to stay with an important movement of the heart. More broadly, resistance is the refusal to grow in inner freedom, the refusal to let go of control. We might think that resistance is something we must deal with harshly, yet wise voices counsel otherwise. "Lack of resistance to prayer and to spiritual direction is a warning sign that the direction and the prayer are on the wrong track. Resistance in prayer is not something to be condemned or pitied but rather welcomed as an indication that the relationship with God is broadening and deepening"

(Barry and Connolly, 94). Some common warning signs of resistance include:

- Having constantly positive experiences to report
- Saying the same thing, over and over
- Avoiding prayer or other spiritual practices, possibly through sleepiness, busyness, and the like
- Lack of desire to fully participate in receiving spiritual guidance

Resistance is natural and even inevitable since growing intimacy with God fuels human fears of vulnerability. When there is a sense that God is drawing close, those fears often erupt not explicitly, but indirectly through resistance. In our program, I see an increase in spiritual maturity when students can be honest about their resistances. Maturity is also evident when they can hold to the truth that "resistance is a sign of great grace trying to break forth."

As I concluded my presentation at Gethsemani

*In the Rule of Benedict,  
the practice of manifestation  
of thoughts to another  
is one of the ways  
to grow in self-honesty,  
to accept the changing  
reality of who we are  
at any moment rather  
than getting lost in defense  
of who we think we are  
or who we would like to be.*



Encounter IV, I suggested some questions for discussion in small groups:

- ♦ Do Buddhists find a parallel experience in the Buddhist tradition, at times a hesitation as liberation draws closer and even an experience of reluctance to name what is happening?
- ♦ Can we accept that resistance is a natural and potentially rich part of the process of spiritual maturation?
- ♦ Can we conceptualize resistance in a way that allows us to work with those who experience it, both ourselves and others, compassionately and with insight?

Participant responses were not stated in broad generalizations; instead, people shared from their personal experiences. Together we affirmed the very human challenge—and invitation—of resistance. And this exchange, in the words of my Buddhist brothers and sisters, was for the sake of all sentient beings.

## Postscript

The conference ended with a closing ritual at Thomas Merton's hermitage in the woods behind Gethsemani Abbey. Participants spoke of what they would take with them from this time of encounter. We sang the "Dedication of Merit" (also known as "Compassionate and Wise") from the opening night of our encounter. The words are a contemporary translation of 1,300-year-old Chinese Buddhist verses, now set to the tune of Loreena McKennitt's "Dark Night of the Soul." This practice of sharing with the world all the goodness created by any wholesome action was a deeply moving way to end our time together.

## Dedication of Merit

### Rev. Heng Sure

May every living being,  
 Our minds as one and radiant with light,  
 Share the fruits of peace  
 With hearts of goodness, luminous and bright.  
 If people hear and see,  
 How hands and hearts can find in giving, unity,  
 May our minds awake,  
 To Great Compassion, wisdom and to joy.  
 May kindness find reward,

May all who sorrow leave their grief and pain;  
 May this boundless light,  
 Dispel the darkness of their endless night.  
 Because our hearts are one,  
 This world of pain turns into Paradise,  
 May all become compassionate and wise,  
 May all become compassionate and wise.<sup>1</sup> ■

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