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THICH NHAT HANH
Introduction by Elaine Pagels

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COMMUNITIES OF
PRACTICE

MINDFULNESS OF WORKING

St. Gregory of Nyssa taught that the contemplative life is heavenly and cannot be lived in the world, that whenever a monk has to leave the monastery to do some apostolic work, he must lament. Many monks do in fact cry when they have to leave their monasteries for an apostolic ministry. Other teachers, like St. Basil, said that it is possible to pray as you work. But he did not mean that we can pray with our

actions. He meant pray with our mouths and our hearts. In Vietnam, we invented “engaged Buddhism” so we could continue our contemplative life while in the midst of helping the victims of war. There must be ways for monks to continue their contemplative lives while engaging in society. In Vietnam, we did not try to avoid the suffering. We worked to relieve the suffering while, at the same time, trying to maintain our mindfulness.

Even in monasteries, we have to cook, clean, sweep, and wash. How can we avoid these? Is there a way to work in a meditative mood? The answer is clearly yes. We practice mindfulness of cooking, cleaning, sweeping, and washing. When we work this way, we touch the ultimate dimension of reality. But we need training to do this, and it helps very much to have a community in which all the members are sharing the same practice. In fact, it is crucial to be with a Sangha or a church where everyone practices together, or dwells mindfully in the Spirit. We need to create such communities for our own benefit.



MONASTIC CULTURE

Thomas Merton wrote about monastic culture. A monastery or practice center is a place where insight is transformed into action. The monastery should be an expression of our insight, our peace, and our joy, a place where peace and beauty are possible. The way the monks and nuns there walk, eat, and work expresses their insight and their joy.

When someone from the city arrives in a monastery compound, just seeing the trees and gardens and hearing the sounds of the bell can calm him down. When he meets a monk walking peacefully, his tension may wash away. The environment, the sights, and the sounds of the monastery begin to work in him for healing and transformation, even before he listens to any liturgy or teaching. Through their true practice and genuine insight, those who live in monasteries, temples, and practice centers offer us a way to obtain peace, joy, and freedom.

When monks offer retreats, they initiate people into the practice of mindfulness, of touching the best things within themselves and touching the ultimate dimension. They know the time is limited, so they offer only practices that retreatants can bring home and continue in their daily lives. If someone is

too busy for a week-long retreat, it is still helpful to come for a weekend or a day of mindfulness, or even half a day. The monks and nuns can offer the peace, joy, and stability they have obtained through the practice. This kind of life can be described as monastic culture.

When you practice with others, it is much easier to obtain stability, joy, and freedom. If you have a chance to visit a retreat center, I hope you enjoy your time there sitting, walking, breathing, praying, and doing everything in mindfulness. The seeds are being watered, and the fruit, transformation, will reveal itself.



COMMUNITY AS A REFUGE

In Christianity, the church is the crown of the path of practice, the true teaching authority. It is often said that there is no salvation outside the church. In Buddhism, a Sangha is a group of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen who practice together to encourage the best qualities in each other. Some Buddhists respect only the Holy Sangha, the actual disciples of the Buddha during his lifetime. But they are already gone. To me, to practice with the Sangha

means to practice with those who are with you now and with those you love. It may not be a Holy Sangha, but if it moves in the direction of transformation, it is a real Sangha. We do not need a perfect or a Holy Sangha to practice. An imperfect Sangha is good enough. We can help build and improve the Sangha by practicing mindfully, step by step, encouraging each other. There is a saying: If a tiger comes down off his mountain and goes to the lowlands, he will be caught by humans and killed. It means if a practitioner leaves his or her Sangha, it becomes difficult to continue the practice. Taking refuge in the Sangha is not a matter of devotion. It is a matter of practice. The Buddhist Sangha includes Arhats, those who have overcome all afflictions, and Stream-enterers, those who have entered the stream that will surely lead them to enlightenment. Stream-enterers have no doubt that the practice will transform their suffering. In Christianity, some people have been declared saints or holy persons. Perhaps they are similar to Arhats and Stream-enterers, but I must confess I don't understand how it is decided who is a saint.

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COMMUNITY AS A
BODY

In John 15, Jesus says, "I am the true vine . . . Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me." This is close to Buddhism. Without mindfulness, we cannot bear the fruit of love, understanding, and liberation. We must bring forth the Buddha in ourselves. We have to evoke the living Buddha in ourselves in order to become more understanding and more loving. Jesus said, "Wherever two or three are gathered in My name, there I am." In Buddhism, it takes at least four persons practicing together to be called a Sangha. That allows the Sanghakarma, the legal procedure for making decisions in community life, to be possible.

When we live as a Sangha, we regard each other as brothers and sisters, and we practice the Six Concords—sharing space, sharing the essentials of daily life, observing the same precepts, using only words that contribute to harmony, sharing our insights and understanding, and respecting each other's viewpoints. A community that follows these principles always lives happily and at peace.

When we gather together to form a Sangha, we practice opening up the confines of our separate self and become a large body of love and understanding. We and our brothers and sisters are one. This idea of salvation is echoed in the Eastern Orthodox church, which has even more of a sense of togetherness—you can only be saved as a community.



THE HOLY SPIRIT IS THE SOUL OF THE CHURCH

When you hammer a nail into a board and accidentally strike your finger, you take care of the injury immediately. The right hand never says to the left hand, "I am doing charitable work for you." It just does whatever it can to help—giving first aid, compassion, and concern. In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, the practice of *dana*, generosity, is like this. We do whatever we can to benefit others without seeing ourselves as helpers and the others as the helped. This is the spirit of non-self.

In Christianity, every member of the church is said to be a part of the body of Christ. In Buddhism, we say that each Sangha member is like a hand or a leg of the Buddha. When we live in accord with the teachings of the Buddha, we are members of one

body. If we practice the precepts well and realize deep concentration and understanding, our Sangha can arrive at liberation from afflictions. Even when liberation is not yet total, people can look at our community and appreciate the loving and harmonious atmosphere. When we practice understanding and love, we are a real Sangha, a fertile field in which good seeds will surely flower.

If there are too many misunderstandings, disputes, and rivalries among members, a Sangha cannot be called a real Sangha, even if it is in a beautiful temple or famous practice center. A church or community that is not filled with the Holy Spirit is not alive. A Sangha that is not pervaded by the energy of mindfulness is not authentic. For a community to be a real place of practice or worship, its members have to cultivate mindfulness, understanding, and love. A church where people are unkind to each other or suppress each other is not a true church. The Holy Spirit is not there. If you want to renew your church, bring the energy of the Holy Spirit into it. When people appreciate each other as brothers and sisters and smile, the Holy Spirit is there. When mindfulness is present, understanding (*prajña*) and love (*maitri* and *karuna*) are there, also.



THE HOLY SPIRIT IS THE
ENERGY OF LOVE AND
UNDERSTANDING

To have a good Sangha, the members must live in a way that helps them generate more understanding and more love. If a Sangha is having difficulties, the way to transform it is to begin by transforming yourself, to go back to your island of self and become more refreshed and more understanding. You will be like the first candle that lights the second that lights the third, fourth, and fifth. But if you try your best to practice in this way and the people in the community still have no light, it may be necessary to find another Sangha or even start a new one. But don't give up too easily. Perhaps you have not practiced deeply enough to transform yourself into a living candle capable of lighting all the other candles. Only when you are convinced that creating a new Sangha is the only alternative to giving up is it time to go ahead and create a new Sangha. Any Sangha is better than a non-Sangha. Without a Sangha, you will be lost.

The same is true within a church. If you see that the Holy Spirit is not present in your church, first make the effort to bring the Holy Spirit in by living

deeply the teachings of Jesus. But if you have no impact, if the practice in the church is not in accord with the life and teachings of Jesus, you may wish to gather those who share your conviction and set up another church, where you can invite the Holy Spirit to enter. To be a real help to your church or Sangha, you must first light your own fire of understanding, love, solidity, and stillness. Then you will be able to inspire others, whether in an existing group or one you are helping establish. Please don't practice "religious imperialism." Even if you have a beautiful temple or church with fine decorations and artwork, if inside there is no tolerance, happiness, understanding, or love, it is a false Sangha, a false church. Please continue to make an effort to do better.



TO BE REAL
SALT

The living teaching expressed by the lives of the Buddha and Jesus should always be the models for our practice. The sutras are not the living teachings of the Buddha. To receive the true teaching, we must emulate the life and work of the Buddha himself. The same is true of Christianity. The Gospels in

their written or even oral form are not the living teaching of Jesus. The teachings *must be practiced* as they were lived by Jesus.

The church is the vehicle that allows us to realize those teachings. The church is the hope of Jesus, just as the Sangha is the hope of the Buddha. It is through the practice of the church and the Sangha that the teachings come alive. Communities of practice, with all their shortcomings, are the best way to make the teachings available to people. The Father, Son and the Holy Spirit need the church in order to be manifested. ("Wherever two or three are gathered in My Name, there I am.") People can touch the Father and the Son through the church. That is why we say that the church is the mystical body of Christ. Jesus was very clear about the need to practice the teaching and to do so in community. He told His disciples to be the light of the world. For a Buddhist, that means mindfulness. The Buddha said that we must each be our own torch. Jesus also told His disciples to be the salt of the world, to be real salt. His teaching was clear and strong. If the church practices well the teachings of Jesus, the Trinity will always be present and the church will have a healing power to transform all that it touches.

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ARE WE PRACTICING
THE TRUE TEACHING?

Are we making Jesus' presence real in our churches today? Are we making the Buddha's presence real in our Sanghas? The Buddha and the monks and nuns of his time were in continuous dialogue with those of other religious faiths, especially the Brahmins. Are we in dialogue with other religions? The Buddha made every effort to remove the barriers between classes. He accepted untouchables and other outcasts into his holy community. Are we doing the same with the poor and oppressed of our day? Are we bringing the service of the Sangha and the church to those who suffer, to those who are discriminated against politically, racially, and economically?

The Buddha accepted women into his Sangha and they became teachers, transmitters of precepts, playing the same roles as the monks. Jesus also taught women freely. The first person Jesus revealed Himself to after His resurrection was a woman. Are we allowing women to be ordained priests and teachers?

The Buddha and his monks and nuns practiced voluntary poverty. They owned only three robes, one bowl, and one water filter. Are we able to live

simply, content with just what we need? Or are our religious institutions simply building and acquiring more and more? The Buddha and his monks and nuns went begging every day to practice humility and to remain in contact with people in their society. Jesus in His time did very much the same. He did not own anything. He always made Himself available to people. He reached out and touched others in order to understand, to help, and to heal. The people He touched were mostly those who were suffering. Are the Sangha and the church of today in real touch with people? Are the churches today touching the poor and oppressed, or do they prefer to touch only the wealthy and powerful?

The Buddha always resisted violence and immorality. He withdrew his support from King Ajattasatru when the latter assassinated his father in order to ascend the throne. He tried to stop King Ajattasatru's efforts to start a war with the neighboring country of Vajji. Are our Sanghas doing the same—opposing social injustice and violence—or are we blessing wars and sending priests along with our armies to support the efforts of war? With utmost courage, Jesus taught a gospel of nonviolence. Is the church today practicing the same by its presence and behavior? Do the churches practice nonviolence and social justice, or do they align themselves with gov-

ernments that practice violence and hatred? During the Vietnam War, the city of Ben Tre was destroyed in the name of salvation. The commander of the operation said, "We had to destroy Ben Tre in order to save it." Is it possible that a servant of the church blessed the troops being sent to such a war?



JESUS NEEDS CHRISTIANS

For the Buddha to be present in the Sangha, we must practice in a way that keeps his teachings alive, and not confined to sermons and scriptures. The best way a Buddhist can keep the teachings of the Buddha alive is to live mindfully in the way the Buddha and his community lived. For Christians, the way to make the Holy Spirit truly present in the church is to practice thoroughly what Jesus lived and taught. It is not only true that Christians need Jesus, but Jesus needs Christians also for His energy to continue in this world.

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FAITH AND PRACTICE

PENETRATING THE HEART
OF REALITY

Our faith must be alive, always growing, like a tree. It is our true religious experience that nourishes our faith and allows it to grow. In the Buddhist tradition, religious experience is described as awakening (bodhi) or insight (prajña). It is not intellectual, not made of notions and concepts, but of the kind of understanding that brings more solidity, freedom,

joy, and faith. For genuine awakening to be possible, we must let go of notions and concepts about nirvana, and about God. We must let go not just of our notions and concepts about the ultimate but also of our notions and concepts about things in the phenomenal realm. In Buddhist practice, we contemplate impermanence, non-self, emptiness, and interbeing to help us touch the phenomenal world more deeply, release our notions and concepts about things, and penetrate the heart of reality. When we touch “things-in-themselves,” we see that they are quite different from our notions and concepts about them. Our notions and concepts are the result of wrong perceptions. That is why, in order to have direct access to their reality, we have to abandon all of our wrong perceptions. When nuclear scientists want to enter the world of elementary particles, they too must abandon their notions of things and objects. French scientist Alfred Kastler said, “Objects or things that have always been thought of as constituents of nature must be renounced.” In the same way, we must abandon our notions of God, Buddha, nirvana, self, non-self, birth, death, being, and non-being.



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ONLY THE SON AND THE
HOLY SPIRIT KNOW HIM

Letting go of notions and concepts may seem to be difficult, but that is exactly what Buddhist meditation teaches us to do. We can use any of a variety of methods to accomplish this. In the beginning, we sometimes use new notions and concepts to neutralize our old ones and lead us to direct experience of reality. The notion of emptiness (*sunyata*), for example, can liberate us from the belief in a self. But then, if we are not vigilant, we can get caught in the notion of emptiness, which is even a bigger problem. To give us a second chance, the Buddha offered the notion of non-emptiness (*asunyata*). If we are able to see that emptiness and non-emptiness point to the same reality, both notions will be transcended and we will touch the world that is free from notions and concepts.

Christians understand that God cannot be experienced through notions and concepts. They speak of "the incomprehensibility of God." Saint John Chrysostom wrote, "Let us invoke Him as the inexpressible God, incomprehensible, invisible, and unknowable. Let us avow that He surpasses all power of human speech, that He eludes the grasp of every

mortal intelligence, that the angels cannot penetrate Him, nor the seraphim see Him in full clarity, nor the cherubim fully understand Him. For He is invisible to the principalities and powers, the virtues of all creatures without exception, only the Son and the Holy Spirit know Him." "Only the Son and the Holy Spirit know Him" because they represent nonconceptual knowing. The Son and the Holy Spirit have direct access to God because they are free from ideas and images of God.

This nonconceptual nature of God is often described by Christians as the mystical night. Saint Gregory of Nyssa, of the Eastern Orthodox church, wrote, "Night designates the contemplation of invisible things after the manner of Moses, who entered into the darkness where God was, this God who makes of darkness His hiding place. Surrounded by the living night the soul seeks Him who is hidden in darkness. She possesses indeed the love of Him whom she seeks, but the beloved escapes the grasp of her thoughts." God the Father and the Kingdom of God must be the objects of our daily *experience*. If Christian monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen do not touch God the Father in their daily lives, their "primitive images" of God will, one day, no longer sustain their joy, peace, and happiness.



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THE SUBSTANCE OF
FAITH

When you begin to practice, you need some tools, just as someone who comes to work on a farm needs tools to work the soil. When you are given tools, there is no use in having them and not working the soil. With proper instruction, you can learn how to handle your tools and how to work the soil. Certain ideas and images can be accepted as tools of spiritual practice. By using them, you can acquire some peace, comfort, stability, and joy. If you continue the practice and make some progress, more sophisticated images and ideas will be provided. These are tools to help you explore the soil of your own life. The Buddha described the practice as *citta bhavana*, cultivating the mind and heart.

After practicing for some time, one day you will find that the images and ideas you have been using are no longer of help, and it is necessary at that point to abandon all ideas and images in order to obtain a truly deep realization. This genuine experience or insight is the very substance of faith, the kind of faith that no one can remove from you because it is not made of images, ideas, or dogma. You cannot be tempted to doubt God or nirvana because God or

nirvana has become the object and subject of your own true experience. For this to happen, two things are essential: first, you have to practice for your belief to become true experience; second, the practice should not be abandoned after some stability and peace have been obtained. We shall examine the reasons for this shortly.

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TAKING REFUGE

Many Buddhists invoke the holy names of Shakyamuni Buddha, Amitabha Buddha, and Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva. While invoking these holy names, the practitioners' minds should be filled with the wholesome qualities of these Buddhas and bodhisattvas. This is the secret of success in the practice known as "Recollection of the Buddha" (*Buddhanusmrti*). There are also other ways of practicing *Buddhanusmrti*, such as visualizing, reciting the Ten Names of the Buddha, meditating on the wisdom and the compassionate actions of the Buddhas, and so forth. The practitioner may chant, "The Lord is Arhat. He is the perfectly enlightened. He is endowed with knowledge and action. He is happy, the knower of all worlds, the insurmountable charioteer



of men to be tamed, the teacher of gods and men, the Buddha, the Blessed One.”

Buddhists also practice the Recollection of the Dharma (*Dharmanusmrti*). The living Dharma is the way embodied by Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and all who practice it. The practitioner recites and contemplates, “The Dharma has been well proclaimed by the Buddha. It brings justice right in this life. It brings coolness and removes the flames of passion and craving. It is timeless. It brings us to a wholesome end. It says, ‘Come and see for yourself.’ It is recognizable by the wise ones.” Or they may chant, “Homage to the *Lotus Sutra*,” and similar practices.

To practice the Recollection of the Sangha (*Sanghanusmrti*), Buddhists recite and contemplate, “Well attained is the Order of the Blessed One’s disciples. Upright is the Order of the Blessed One’s disciples. Righteous and Dharma-abiding is the Order of the Blessed One’s disciples. The Sangha is comprised of the four pairs and the eight types who are worthy of offerings, hospitality, gifts, and salutations, unsurpassable fields of merit in the world.” All Buddhists practice taking refuge in the Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Doing so brings the feeling of calm, solidity, and comfort, and nourishes faith. “I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dharma. I take refuge in the Sangha. (*Buddham*

saranam gacchami. Dharmam saranam gacchami. Sangham saranam gacchami.)”



INTERIOR RECOLLECTION

In the Christian tradition, prayer produces a similar effect. Prayers are drawn from the Bible, especially the Psalms, and these words become the words of the practitioner through memorizing and repeating them with concentration. Christian meditation often takes scriptures as its object, *meditatio scripturarum*. The meditator puts all his or her heart into this practice of prayer and meditation. That is why it is called Prayer of the Heart.

Like their Buddhist counterparts, Christian practitioners do not engage in excessive intellectual or analytical scrutiny of the scriptures. For the Desert Fathers, prayer was minimally wordy. Saint Macarius said, “It is not necessary to use many words. Only stretch out your arms and say, ‘Lord, have pity on me as you desire and as you well know how.’ And if the enemy presses you hard, say, ‘Lord, come to my aid.’” Other early Christian monks also urged people to use short, simple prayers drawn from the Psalms. The most frequently used was “O God,



come to my assistance. (*Deus in adiutorium meum intende.*)”

Christians also practice reciting the holy name of Jesus Christ. Saint Macarius said, “There is no other perfect meditation than the saving and blessed name of our Lord Jesus Christ dwelling without interruption in you.” This practice is called by Christians “interior recollection” (equivalent to the Sanskrit *anusmrti*, and the Pali *anussati*). The practice consists of abandoning distracting thoughts and humbly invoking the name of Jesus with all your heart. Thomas Merton wrote, “This simple practice is considered to be of crucial importance in the monastic prayer of the Eastern Church, since the sacramental power of the name of Jesus is believed to bring the Holy Spirit into the heart of the praying monk.”

For the monks of old, the secret of success in the practice was to keep the name of Jesus always in mind. The name of Jesus brings the energy of God, namely the Holy Spirit, into your own being. When the monk was able to do this, he could live his daily life in the presence of God. Buddhists in the Pure Land tradition practice similarly. They know what is most essential is to maintain true concentration while reciting the name of Buddha, just as Chris-

tians know that they have to practice with their hearts and not call the Lord’s name in vain.

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AFFLICTIONS BLOCK THE WAY

Christians emphasize Prayer of the Heart, and Buddhists speak about one-pointed mind (*cittasekagata*). Christians and Buddhists both realize that without concentration, without abandoning distracting thoughts, prayer and meditation will not bear fruit. Concentration and devotion bring calm, peace, stability, and comfort to both Buddhists and Christians. If farmers use farming tools to cultivate their land, practitioners use prayer and meditation to cultivate their consciousness. The fruits and flowers of the practice spring forth from the soil of the mind.

Buddhists and Christians know that nirvana or the Kingdom of God is within their hearts. Buddhist sutras speak of Buddha nature as the seed of enlightenment that is already in everyone’s consciousness. The Gospels speak of the Kingdom of God as a mustard seed planted in the soil of consciousness. The practices of prayer and meditation help us touch

the most valuable seeds that are within us, and they put us in contact with the ground of our being. Buddhists consider nirvana, or the ultimate dimension of reality, as the ground of being. The original mind, according to Buddhism, is always shining. Afflictions such as craving, anger, doubt, fear, and forgetfulness are what block the light, so the practice is to remove these five hindrances. When the energy of mindfulness is present, transformation takes place. When the energy of the Holy Spirit is within you, understanding, love, peace, and stability are possible. God is within. You are, yet you are not, but God is in you. This is interbeing. This is non-self.

But I am afraid that many Christians and many Buddhists do not practice, or if they do, they practice only when they find themselves in difficult situations, and after that, they forget. Or their practice may be superficial. They support churches and temples, organize ceremonies, convert people, do charity work or social work, or take up an apostolic ministry, but do not practice mindfulness or pray while they act. They may devote an hour each day for chanting and liturgy, but after a while, the practice becomes dry and automatic and they do not know how to refresh it. They may believe that they are serving the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, or serving the Trinity and the church, but their practice

does not touch the living Buddha or the living Christ. At the same time, these men and women do not hesitate to align themselves with those in power in order to strengthen the position of their church or community. They believe that political power is needed for the well-being of their church or community. They build up a self instead of letting go of the ideas of self. Then they look at this self as absolute truth and dismiss all other spiritual traditions as false. This is a very dangerous attitude; it always leads to conflicts and war. Its nature is intolerance.



THE ABYSS OF DOUBT

Another danger of the lack of authentic, regular practice and the lack of spiritual maturation is that one day the believer will fall into the abyss of doubt. When suffering, fear, and doubt come together in an intensive way, the prayer that worked a little many years earlier may no longer be effective. The ideas, images, and analogies that were invoked in the past may not be able to cover over the vast interior emptiness. The Diamond Sutra teaches that the Tathagata cannot be seen through sounds or images. Christian mystics teach that God is invisible, un-



knowable, and free from mental representation. If we do not continue to grow, we will not be able to touch the reality of the absolute. That is why it is crucial to remember that the practice should not be abandoned after some stability and peace have been attained.

One day when you are plunged into the dark night of doubt, the images and notions that were helpful in the beginning no longer help. They only cover up the anguish and suffering that have begun to surface. Thomas Merton wrote, "The most crucial aspect of this experience is precisely the temptation to doubt God Himself." This is a genuine risk. If you stick to an idea or an image of God and if you do not touch the reality of God, one day you will be plunged into doubt. According to Merton, "Here we are advancing beyond the stage where God made Himself accessible to our mind in simple and primitive images." Simple and primitive images may have been the object of our faith in God in the beginning, but as we advance, He becomes present without any image, beyond any satisfactory mental representation. We come to a point where any notion we had can no longer represent God.



THE ORIGINAL MIND

In the Buddhist monastic tradition, monks are urged not to live too comfortably. A life that is too comfortable will make spiritual growth difficult. Food, clothing, and lodging should always be adequate, but not excessive. A layperson who wants to practice the Way should also live a simple life. Jesus said that it is as difficult for a wealthy person to enter the Kingdom of God as it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Christian monastic prayers flourish in environments like deserts, where there is not a lot of comfort. Thomas Merton wrote, "We must frankly admit that self-denial and sacrifice are absolutely essential to the life of prayer." I understand him, although I would not describe a simple life, a life free of craving, as self-denial or sacrifice. A life of prayer and contemplation can be filled with joy and happiness.

Without continuous and deep practice, monks can also be caught by the traps of the world. The activity of a contemplative monk should be contemplation. In the Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing (*Anapanasati Sutta*), the Buddha took a deep look at the community of monks who had been practicing at the Jeta Grove and declared, "My

friends, I am very happy to see that you have been doing the most important thing that a monk should do, which is to practice." It was recorded in this sutra that not only did the senior monks practice well during the retreat but they also took good care of the young monks and helped guide their practice. That brought great happiness to the Buddha. The task of a monk is to practice and not to take care of the worldly life. If we are not careful enough, teaching the Dharma or performing apostolic ministry will carry us away from our original mind, the mind of practice, the mind of love, which is the most precious possession a monk can have.



AN EXPRESSION OF LOVE

Buddhists call original mind, the mind of enlightenment, *bodhicitta*. Saint Gregory taught that the contemplative life is the heavenly life, which cannot be lived "in this world." Monks need to avoid doing secular business. To penetrate the mystery of God, the contemplative must "rest from exterior action and cleave only to the desire of the Maker." In the Middle Ages, many monks followed this teaching.

The vocation of the monk was to stay in the monastery and pray. When he was called forth to engage in church affairs, he was expected to do so with weeping and lamentation. Saint Peter of Celles, a twelfth-century Benedictine monk, said that "episcopal [i.e., bishops'] business" is simply "the world."

Is it possible for an apostolic ministry to go together with a contemplative life? In both Buddhist and Christian circles, the answer is yes, it is possible, but not easy. To succeed, we need support, and the most important support is the presence of others who are capable of living the contemplative life while doing the work that needs to be done. Our work is performed as an expression of love. We cannot avoid it, so we should do it in a way that allows a contemplative life to be possible.

In the fourth century, Saint Basil taught that an active religious life is possible. Ascetics, he said, should maintain contact with the world, or at least with the Christian community, and take care of charity and mercy works. The monk's private prayer is the prayer carried on while he is at work. Saint Basil said, "For prayer and psalmody every hour is suitable, that while one's hands are busy with their tasks we may praise God sometimes with the tongue, or if not, with the heart. . . . Thus we

acquire a recollected spirit, when in every action we beg from God the success of our labor and satisfy our debt of gratitude to Him.”



HOW NOT TO LOSE THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

The Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness (*Satipatthana Sutta*), one of the most basic texts of Buddhist meditation, teaches that mindfulness must be practiced throughout the day, in whatever position you find yourself and during whatever action you undertake. Mindfulness practice is not confined to the sitting position. The monk practices mindfulness while putting on his robe, washing his bowl, walking, standing, bending, stretching, carrying water, splitting wood, and so on. Based on this teaching, engaged Buddhism was practiced by the monks in Vietnam during the war in the 1960s and 1970s. Monks and nuns participated in the work of helping refugees, orphans, and the wounded. In the situation of war, a monk cannot just sit in the meditation hall while bombs are being dropped all around. The bombs may fall on his temple as well. The heart of Buddhist meditation is mindfulness—

the energy that helps us know what is happening in the present moment. If what is happening in the present moment is the destruction of human lives, the monk should engage himself in the work of helping and caring. This is a concrete expression of compassion.

The question is not whether to be engaged or not. The question is how to engage without losing the contemplative life. The teaching of the *Satipatthana Sutta* says that this is possible. How can we carry on the labor of love without losing the practice? Listen to Mother Teresa: “Our Sisters must walk the street, take the streetcar as other people do, and enter the houses of the poor. We cannot enclose ourselves behind walls and wait for the poor to knock at our door. . . . We are street people. Our Sisters walk the streets and they pray as they walk. Sometimes they tell me how much time it took to reach a place, they tell me how many rosaries they said—three rosaries, four rosaries. They walk so rapidly that in Calcutta they are called ‘the racing Sisters.’ ” Imagine how difficult it is to walk fast and to say rosaries at the same time! The pressure is always there. In the Buddhist tradition, there is the practice of walking meditation. We walk because we have to go somewhere, but we walk in a way that brings us

calm, stability, and joy with each step. The question is how to structure our lives so that we do each thing in mindfulness, without losing our practice.



MINDFUL LIVING IS POSSIBLE

Contemplation and action go well together if the monk knows how to organize his daily life. One day of mindfulness every week is essential. This goes well with the spirit of the Sabbath. The best way to practice is with a Sangha: the collective energy of mindfulness deepens the practice. The presence of the Sangha is a protection and an empowerment, and this presence sustains us during the rest of the week as well. The monk practices mindful breathing while performing his daily tasks, eats silently in mindfulness, washes his bowl as though he is bathing the baby Buddha, practices taking refuge in the Three Jewels in every moment, helps the sick and the wounded as though he is serving a Buddha or a bodhisattva, and looks deeply at each object he comes into contact with—an orange, a raindrop, a leaf, or a dying person. After several years of training, this is possible, especially if the monk lives and works in a Sangha where others are following the

same practice. I know a monk who was mindful of his breathing and of every step he made throughout an entire teaching tour of one hundred days in one of the busiest societies in the world.



OUR ORIGINAL PURPOSE

In *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Pope John Paul II wrote, “The Pope prays as the Holy Spirit permits him to pray.” For me, the Holy Spirit is mindfulness itself. How can someone pray without mindfulness? He also wrote, “Man will not cross the threshold of truth without the help of the Holy Spirit. Prayer for the suffering and with the suffering is therefore a special part of this great cry that the Church and the Pope raise together with Christ.” I believe that if anyone, Buddhist or Christian, embraces suffering with his or her own mindfulness or allows the Holy Spirit to work within himself, he will come to really understand the nature of that suffering and will no longer impose on himself or others dogmas that constitute obstacles for working toward the cessation of that suffering.

When we are caught in notions, rituals, and the outer forms of the practice, not only can we not receive and embody the spirit of our tradition, we

become an obstacle for the true values of the tradition to be transmitted. We lose sight of the true needs and actual suffering of people, and the teaching and practice, which were intended to relieve suffering, now cause suffering. Narrow, fundamentalist, and dogmatic practices always alienate people, especially those who are suffering. We have to remind ourselves again and again of our original purpose, and the original teachings and intention of Buddha, Jesus, and other great sages and saints.



THE WELL IS WITHIN US

In Buddhism, the source of our energy is faith in our daily practice. Faith in an *idea* is too risky. Ideas can change, even ideas about the Buddha. Tomorrow we may not believe the same thing, and we may fall into the abyss of doubt. We know very well that our daily practice of mindful living has brought us joy and peace, and so we have faith and confidence in our practice. It is a kind of experiential faith. We know that when we practice walking mindfully, we refresh ourselves, and we feel peace and joy with every step. No one can remove this from us because

we have tasted the reality. This kind of faith gives us real strength.

In Buddhism, we speak of touching nirvana with our own body. In Christianity, you can also touch the Kingdom of God with your body, right here and now. It is much safer than placing our hope in the future. If we cling to our idea of hope in the future, we might not notice the peace and joy that are available in the present moment. The best way to take care of the future is to take care of the present moment. Practicing conscious breathing, aware of each thought and each act, we are reborn, fully alive, in the present moment. We needn't abandon our hope entirely, but unless we channel our energies toward being aware of what is going on in the present moment, we might not discover the peace and happiness that are available right now. The well is within us. If we dig deeply in the present moment, the water will spring forth.



RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IS HUMAN EXPERIENCE

I have noticed that Christians and Buddhists who have lived deeply their contemplative lives always come to express themselves in more non-dualistic,

non-dogmatic ways. Christian mystics and Zen masters never sound speculative or intellectual. A dialogue between a Christian mystic and a Zen master would not be difficult to understand. Their speculative minds have given way to a nondiscursive spirit. Because they have learned not to get caught in notions or representations, they do not speak as though they alone hold the truth, and they do not think that those in other traditions are going the wrong way.

Religious experience is inevitably human experience. It has to do with the human consciousness, both individual and collective. In Buddhism, religious practice begins with mindfulness. As the practice deepens and mindfulness becomes more sustained, the practitioner is able to touch, feel, see, and understand more deeply. Understanding makes love and compassion possible, and when love and compassion are present, understanding deepens. The practitioner learns how to practice to maintain mindfulness and help it grow. She knows that while mindfulness is alive, transformation can take place.

Those who know how to dwell in mindfulness, the sutra says, are the ones who live in the house of the Tathagata, wear the Tathagata's clothes, and eat the Tathagata's food. They dwell in peace and security. But our habit energies are strong, and we have the tendency to be overcome by dispersion and

forgetfulness, the opposites of mindfulness. The moment we become lost in forgetfulness, we stop dwelling in the house of the Tathagata. King Tran Thai Tong of thirteenth-century Vietnam wrote, "You are invited to stay in the house of the Tathagata, but your habit energy makes you sleep night after night among the reeds." The Buddhist way of handling habit energy is to be aware of it each time it arises. The moment we are aware of it, it already begins to transform. But training in mindfulness practice is needed for us to succeed.



LOVING GOD IS LOVING LIVING BEINGS

I like the expression "resting in God." When you pray with all your heart, the Holy Spirit is in you, and as you continue to pray, the Holy Spirit continues in you. You do not need to do anything else. As long as the Holy Spirit is there, everything is fine. You are resting in God, and God will work in you. For transformation to take place, you only need to allow the Holy Spirit to stay in you. The Holy Spirit is the energy of God that shines forth and shows you the way. You can see things deeply, understand deeply, and love deeply.

If practiced in this way, the Lord's Prayer can bring about real transformation: "Our Father who art in Heaven, Hallowed be Thy name, Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven." A Buddhist would understand this as touching the ultimate dimension and realizing that the ultimate dimension and the historical dimension are one. It is like the wave touching the water, which is its own nature. This touching removes fear, anger, anxiety, and craving. Heaven and earth become one. "Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." The Lord's Prayer shows us that loving God is loving the living beings we see and touch in our daily life. If we can love them, we can love God.



EMPTY OF WHAT?

Mindfulness, the capacity to be here, to witness deeply everything that happens in the present moment, is the beginning of enlightenment. The same is true of the Holy Spirit. Buddhists say that everyone has the seed of mindfulness in the deepest level of his or her consciousness, and that the practice

helps that seed to manifest. This seed of mindfulness is the presence of the Buddha in us, called Buddha nature (*Buddhata*), the nature of enlightenment. Christians say that God is in everyone's heart. The Holy Spirit can be described as being always present in our hearts in the form of a seed. Every time we pray or invoke the name of the Lord, that seed manifests itself as the energy of God. The Kingdom of God is in us as a seed, a mustard seed. If we cannot accept this, why do we say that God is within us?

As the lamp is lit, we begin to see things within us and around us more deeply. According to the teachings of Buddhism, it is important to look deeply into things and discover their nature of impermanence (*anitya*) and non-self (*anatman*). Impermanence and non-self are not negative. They are the doors that open to the true nature of reality. They are not the causes of our pain. It is our delusion that causes us to suffer. Regarding something that is impermanent as permanent, holding to something that is without self as having a self, we suffer. Impermanence is the same as non-self. Since phenomena are impermanent, they do not possess a permanent identity. Non-self is also emptiness. Emptiness of what? Empty of a permanent self. Non-self means also interbeing. Because everything is made of ev-

everything else, nothing can be by itself alone. Non-self is also interpenetration, because everything contains everything else. Non-self is also interdependence, because this is made of that. Each thing depends on all other things to be. That is interdependence. Nothing can be by itself alone. It has to inter-be with all other things. This is non-self.



THE NATURE OF INTERBEING

Mindfulness and concentration lead to a direct experience of impermanence and non-self, so that impermanence and non-self are no longer notions and images, but a direct experience. A Zen monk said, "Before I began to practice, mountains were mountains, and rivers were rivers. During many years of practice, mountains stopped being mountains and rivers stopped being rivers. Now as I understand things properly, mountains are mountains, and rivers are rivers." Thanks to the practice, this monk was able to see the nature of interbeing. He was no longer caught by the notions of self and non-self. Some people say that Buddhist practice is to dissolve the self. *They do not understand that there is no*

self to be dissolved. There is only the notion of self to be transcended.

As soon as you know mountains are made of rivers and everything else and rivers are made of mountains and everything else, it is safe for you to use the words "mountains" and "rivers." In Buddhist practice, what is essential is for you to realize the nature of interbeing and transcend the notion of self and all its constraints. When you touch the reality of non-self, you touch at the same time nirvana, the ultimate dimension of being, and become free from fear, attachment, illusion, and craving.



THE GROUND OF EXPERIENCE

It is necessary to die in order to be reborn. As soon as you experience impermanence, non-self, and interbeing, you are born again. But if the plant does not become dormant in the winter, it cannot be reborn in the spring. Jesus said that unless you are reborn as a child, you cannot enter the Kingdom of God. Thomas Merton wrote, "The living experience of divine love and the Holy Spirit . . . is a true awareness that one has died and risen in Christ. It is an experience of mystical renewal, an inner

transformation brought about entirely by the power of God's merciful love, implying the 'death' of the self-centered and self-sufficient ego and the appearance of a new and liberated self who lives and acts in the Spirit." It would be impossible for a monk or a layperson to have this experience if she does not practice resting in God, if she only takes refuge in work, losing herself in it. Whether the practice is *psalmodia*, *lectio*, *oratio*, *contemplatio*, or *meditatio*, the true presence of the Holy Spirit in one's being is the ground that makes this experience possible, even if we affirm that the experience is a gift of God.



CONCRETE PRAYER

The beginner's mind, the mind of love or the mind of enlightenment (*bodhicitta*), is absolutely essential for the Buddhist practitioner. It is the source of energy that helps the monk focus all his being on the practice. The career of the practitioner is the career of enlightenment. Enlightenment here means touching the ultimate, nirvana. Daily practice helps consolidate that mind and prevent it from being eroded. If his mind of enlightenment is strong, the monk will follow the path of practice naturally, like water flowing in a stream. In Buddhism, this is called

"stream-winning." Anything the monk encounters after entering the stream becomes the object of his meditation: a floating cloud, a corpse, even his own fear. His deep concentration helps him touch and penetrate the objects of his meditation and reveal their true nature. Monks or laypersons who practice well always observe the Five Wonderful Precepts, the 58 Bodhisattva Precepts, or the 250 Pratimoksa Precepts. These guidelines are the expression of the practitioner's understanding and love. They are not rules imposed from the outside. They are the concrete practices of mindfulness that help him focus his entire being on the object of his meditation. Precepts (*sila*) make concentration (*samadhi*) possible, and concentration brings about enlightenment (*prajña*). Enlightenment is the breaking through to the true nature of reality.

Observing the Ten Commandments in daily life is also the concrete practice of prayer and meditation. Prayer of the Heart is not possible for one who does not consistently observe the commandments. If you do not observe, for example, "Thou shalt not kill," how can "Thou shall love the Lord thy God" be possible?



TOTAL SURRENDER

The true nature of things is called, in Buddhism, cessation (*nirodha*) or extinction (*nirvana*). Cessation is first of all the cessation of all notions and illusions, and extinction is the extinction of notions and wrong perceptions. The extinction of delusion brings about the cessation of craving, anger, and fear, and the manifestation of peace, solidity, and freedom. All notions applied to the phenomenal world—such as creation, destruction, being, non-being, one, many, coming, and going—are transcended. The greatest relief we can obtain is available when we touch the ultimate, Tillich's "ground of being." We no longer identify our body's duration as our lifetime. We no longer think that life begins when we are born or stops when we die, because the notions of birth and death have been transcended. Life is no longer confined to time and space. This is the practice of releasing the notion "lifetime."

Touching nirvana, touching the ultimate dimension, is a total and unconditional surrender to God. If the wave knows that its ground of being is water, it overcomes all fear and sorrow. The moment the monk surrenders his entire being to God as the

ground of being, all of his fears vanish. Listen to Thomas Merton: "In the language of the monastic fathers, all prayers, reading, meditation, and all the activities of the monastic life are aimed at purity of heart, an unconditioned and totally humble surrender to God, a total acceptance of ourselves and of our situation as willed by Him. It means the renunciation of all deluded images of ourselves, all exaggerated estimates of our own capacities, in order to obey God's will as it comes to us."

TWO TYPES OF
CAUSATION

Once the ultimate is touched, all notions are transcended: birth, death, being, non-being, before, after, one, many, and so forth. Questions like "Does God exist?" or "Does nirvana exist?" are no longer valid. God and nirvana as concepts have been transcended. Existence (being) and non-existence (non-being) as concepts have also been transcended. Even one notion (God/nirvana) is enough to block access to the ultimate, so why add another (existence/not-existence)? For the one who has had an experience of God or nirvana, the question "Does God exist?" is an indication of the lack of insight. All soteriolo-

gies belong at first to the historical dimension. But as one's observation gets deeper and the ultimate dimension is touched, the notions of beginning and ending are transcended.

According to Buddhism, there are two types of causality: causation within the historical dimension and causation between the historical dimension and the ultimate dimension. When we say, "I was born from my parents, and I was raised and nourished by my family and society," we are speaking about causation within the historical dimension. When we say, "Waves are born from water," we are speaking about causation as relationship between the historical dimension and the ultimate dimension. When Jesus called Himself the Son of Man, He was speaking of causation in terms of the historical dimension. When He referred to Himself as the Son of God, He was speaking of the relationship between the historical and the ultimate. We cannot speak of the ultimate in terms of the historical. We cannot treat the noumena, the ontological ground, as a detail or aspect of the phenomena. The Father-Son relationship is not the father-son relationship. God does not make the world in the way a baker makes bread. *Samsara* and *nirvana* are two dimensions of the same reality. There is a relationship, but it is a phenomena-noumena relationship, not a

phenomena-phenomena one. Buddhists are aware of that. That is why they speak of "the separate investigation of noumena (*svabhava*) and phenomena (*lak-sana*)." And yet, at the same time, they are aware that the two realms are one.

Let us listen to the *Quicumque vult* from the Book of Common Prayer:

*"And the Catholic Faith is this: that we worship
one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity.
Neither confounding the Persons nor dividing the
Substance.*

*For there is one Person of the Father, another of the
Son, and another of the Holy Ghost.*

*But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of
the Holy Ghost is all one: the Glory equal, the
majesty co-eternal.*

*Such as the Father is, such is the Son; and such is
the Holy Ghost.*

*The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate, and the
Holy Ghost uncreate.*

*The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy
Ghost eternal . . .*

*So the Father is God the Son is God; and the Holy
Ghost is God.*

*And yet they are not three Gods; but one
God . . .*

The Father is made of none: neither created, nor begotten.

The Son is of the Father alone: not made, nor created but begotten.

The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son, neither made nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding.

For the right Faith is that we believe and confess: that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man: God, of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and Man, of the substance of his mother, born in the world; Perfect God, and perfect Man: of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting;

Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead; and inferior to the Father, as touching his manhood."

The insight of interbeing, the nature of non-self, can be touched when you hear this prayer. The same insight can also be obtained when you contemplate phenomena—a magnolia, a squirrel, or a cloud.



WHO IS NOT UNIQUE?

John Paul II, in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, insists that Jesus is the only Son of God: "Christ is

absolutely original and absolutely unique. If He were only a wise man like Socrates, if He were a 'prophet' like Muhammed, if He were 'enlightened' like Buddha, without any doubt He would not be what He is. He is the one mediator between God and humanity." This statement does not seem to 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. All Christians, while praying to God, address Him as Father. Of course Christ is unique. But who is not unique? Socrates, Muhammed, the Buddha, you, and I are all unique. The idea behind the statement, however, is the notion that Christianity provides the only way of salvation and all other religious traditions are of no use. This attitude excludes dialogue and fosters religious intolerance and discrimination. It does not help.



THE DIFFERENCE IS IN EMPHASIS

It is a natural tendency of man to personify qualities like love, freedom, understanding, and also the ultimate. In Buddhism, the Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajñāparamita*) is described as the Mother of all Buddhas, and Indian Buddhists did represent it in

the form of a female person. The teaching of the Buddha, the Dharma, is also represented as a body, the Dharmakaya. Buddhists make offerings to the historical Buddha as well as to the Dharmakaya. But they know that Dharmakaya is not a person in the sense of the five aggregates: form, feelings, perceptions, mental states, and consciousness. It is like Freedom being personified as a Goddess. Freedom is not a body made of the five aggregates. The ultimate can be represented as a person, but the ultimate cannot be just an assembly of the five aggregates. The true body of Jesus is His teaching. The only way to touch Him is to practice His teaching. The teaching of Jesus is His living body, and this living body of Christ manifests itself whenever and wherever His teaching is practiced.

Buddhists and Christians alike, in dialogue, want to recognize similarities as well as differences in their traditions. It is good that an orange is an orange and a mango is a mango. The colors, the smells, and the tastes are different, but looking deeply, we see that they are both authentic fruits. Looking more deeply, we can see the sunshine, the rain, the minerals, and the earth in both of them. Only their manifestations are different. Authentic experience makes a religion a true tradition. Religious experience is, above all,

human experience. If religions are authentic, they contain the same elements of stability, joy, peace, understanding, and love. The similarities as well as the differences are there. They differ only in terms of emphasis. Glucose and acid are in all fruits, but their degrees differ. We cannot say that one is a real fruit and the other is not.



REAL DIALOGUE BRINGS TOLERANCE

The absence of true experience brings forth intolerance and a lack of understanding. Organized religions, therefore, must create conditions that are favorable for true practice and true experience to flower. Authentic ecumenical practices help different schools within a tradition learn from one another and restore the best aspects of the tradition that may have been eroded. This is true within both Buddhism and Christianity. Today in the West, all schools of Buddhism are present, and through their interactions with one another, mutual learning is taking place, and the elements that have been lost in one tradition can be revived by another. The Roman Catholic church, the Eastern Orthodox

church, and the Protestant churches could do the same. And it is possible to go even further. Different religious traditions can engage in dialogue with one another in a true spirit of ecumenism. Dialogue can be fruitful and enriching if both sides are truly open. If they really believe that there are valuable elements in each other's tradition and that they can learn from one another, they will also rediscover many valuable aspects of their own tradition through such an encounter. Peace will be a beautiful flower blooming on this field of practice.

Real dialogue makes us more open-minded, tolerant, and understanding. Buddhists and Christians both like to share their wisdom and experience. Sharing in this way is important and should be encouraged. But sharing does not mean wanting others to abandon their own spiritual roots and embrace your faith. That would be cruel. People are stable and happy only when they are firmly rooted in their own tradition and culture. To uproot them would make them suffer. There are already enough people uprooted from their tradition today, and they suffer greatly, wandering around like hungry ghosts, looking for something to fill their spiritual needs. We must help them return to their tradition. Each tradition must establish dialogue with its own people

first, especially with those young people who are lost and alienated. During the last fifteen years while sharing the Buddha's Dharma in the West, I always urged my Western friends to go back to their own traditions and rediscover the values that are there, those values they have not been able to touch before. The practice of Buddhist meditation can help them do so, and many have succeeded. Buddhism is made of non-Buddhist elements. Buddhism has no separate self. When you are a truly happy Christian, you are also a Buddhist. And vice versa.

We Vietnamese have learned these lessons from our own suffering. When Christian missionaries came to Vietnam several hundred years ago, they urged us to abandon the cult of ancestral worship and to abandon our Buddhist tradition. Later, when they offered to help us in refugee camps in Thailand and Hong Kong, they also urged us to give up our roots. The good will to help and to save us was there, but the correct understanding was not. People cannot be happy if they are rootless. We can enrich one another's spiritual lives, but there is no need to alienate people from their ancestors and their values. This situation calls for more understanding. Church authorities must strive to understand the suffering of their own people. The lack of understanding brings

about the lack of tolerance and true love, which results in the alienation of people from the church. True understanding comes from true practice. Understanding and love are values that transcend all dogma.

GLOSSARY



anapanasati (Pali)—lit. “mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out”

anatman (Skt.)—non-self or not-self; means there is no independent existence separable from everything else

Anguttara Nikaya—one of the five collections of the Buddha’s discourses preserved in the Pali language

anitya (Skt.)—impermanence; according to the Buddha, everything is impermanent.

apophatic theology—from the Greek *apophasis*, “denying,” also known as “negative theology.” Knowledge of God obtained by way of negating all that we say He is.

