

My Pilgrimage in Christian-Buddhist Encounter: Lessons for Today's Practitioners

by Notto R. Thelle

Editor's Note: This autobiographical account was originally presented at the Ralph D. Winter Lectureship in February 2021, under the theme, "Buddhist-Christian Encounters: Today's Realities in Light of the Pioneering Work of Karl Ludvig Reichelt in China." Each of the four missiologists who presented was asked to share his pilgrimage and to receive responses from the others.

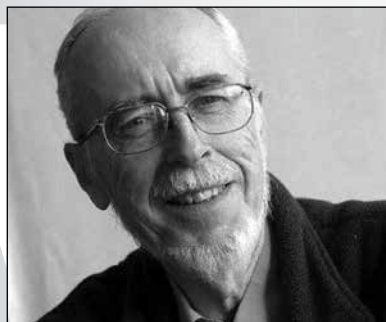
The Way and the Wind

The first five years of my life I grew up at Tao Fong Shan outside Hong Kong, "The Mountain of the Tao Wind" or "Christ Wind." So, to some extent, my pilgrimage with Buddhism began in my childhood. Buddhist pilgrims came from all over China with the fragrance of incense in their robes. They greeted us with deep bows and clasped hands. They had brands on their shaven heads as a sign that they had cut their ties to the world and were now following the Buddha Way in search of wisdom.

Some of them abandoned the monastic habit after a time and let their hair grow. They found a new confidence in their belief that God's grace was stronger than the karmic consequences and decided to follow the Christ Way rather than the Buddha Way. Others realized that Christianity did not alter their lives at all—the Christian systems of thought could not compare with the philosophical reflection and meditative depth of Buddhism.

The few years of my childhood would hardly have been more than a distant dream if I did not have the privilege of returning to the East as an adult, this time to Japan. For sixteen years (1969–1985) I was involved in research and interfaith dialogue there, working as Associate Director of the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions in Kyoto. Buddhism was the main focus of study and dialogue, but I also had the opportunity to have close connections with other Eastern religions, Shinto, and numerous new faiths.¹ In addition, I was responsible for various types of pastoral work in other communities.

The experiences in Japan and the subsequent years of study, reflection and dialogue in the borderland where faith meets faith has been one of the great privileges of my life, a spiritual pilgrimage where I am still wondering about the new landscapes that may appear beyond the next turn of the path. I can only share a few moments of such encounters.



*Notto R. Thelle is professor emeritus of the University of Oslo, where he taught ecumenics and missiology from 1986 to 2006. Before that he served as a missionary for sixteen years in Japan (1969–1985), involved in research and interfaith dialogue in what he calls the "borderland" where faith meets faith. Most of the time he served as Associate Director of the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions in Kyoto (1974–1985). He has published some pioneer research concerning Buddhist-Christian relations in Japan and China, in addition to Norwegian textbooks and translations of Buddhist and Eastern traditions. He has written a number of books and essays in Norwegian on the dialogue with Eastern traditions and alternative forms of Western spirituality, and his treatise on Christian spirituality, *Who Can Stop the Wind: Travels in the Borderland Between East and West*, has been translated into English.*

Mission and Apostasy

During my time at high school, I was fascinated by Henrik Ibsen's great play *Emperor and Galilean*, where the emperor Julian the Apostate is the main protagonist. Ibsen portrays the young ruler as a zealous witness to the Christian faith, who seeks to defeat the old religion by undermining it from within. He wanted to conquer the teachers of pagan wisdom by sitting at their feet, following them into their own world, and wresting the weapons from their grasp:

Wrestling with the lions! . . . It is God's will that I should seek out Libanios [the teacher of wisdom]—worm from him his arts and his learning—strike the unbelievers with their own weapons—strike, strike like Paul—conquer like Paul in the cause of the Lord!

My own background had nurtured my interest in Buddhism. I was fascinated by Reichelt's vision that the deepest aspirations in Buddhism pointed to Christ, and his wish to lead Buddhists "on internal paths" to Him who was the Way and the Life.

In my youthful dreams I would do like the young prince Julian, I wanted to enter the world of Buddhist wisdom, wrest their skill and learning from them, and "strike them down" with their own weapons. In my immature zeal, I failed to recognize the historical fact that it was Julian himself who was conquered by the pagan wisdom and became "the Apostate" Emperor who used his position to conquer the Galilean.

I tell this with some embarrassment. But the story remains as a constant reminder that an honest encounter with Buddhism or other religions and ideologies is risky in the sense that one may discover one day that the other has undermined your commitment and perhaps even "conquered" your faith.

Unprepared for Encounter

When I eventually arrived in Japan as a missionary, it was a shock to discover that I was unprepared for the encounter with Buddhism. It was easy to see that Buddhism had a hard time in Japan: it is primarily a funeral religion, a watered-down piety based on customs and mixed with folk religious practices; people are Buddhists without knowing what Buddhism is. But there are also depths of faith and religious experience which not only present a *positive* challenge to one's faith but may also be a stumbling block.

As a missionary, I brought along much of the best in Norwegian Christian life. I had grown up in the pietistic tradition which was fairly generous and tolerant. My own

home was nourished by genuine faith and commitment to missionary work. I went through theological studies, accompanied by the usual stages of fascination and crisis—doubt, uncertainty, and finally clarity. But I soon discovered that my Norwegian background had not equipped me to encounter Buddhism in a meaningful way. The problem was not primarily lack of knowledge—what I knew about Buddhism, could easily be enhanced by further studies. What was missing was the dimension of *depth* in my faith, something that would be capable of encountering what Rudolf Otto has called the "almost incomprehensible experiential world" of Mahāyāna Buddhism—at least Mahāyāna at its best.

The only way forward was to set out on a journey, seeking to penetrate more deeply into Buddhism. I became a student at Otani University in Kyoto, belonging to the Pure Land Buddhist tradition. I engaged in spiritual dialogues with Buddhist friends and teachers, meditated under Buddhist masters, took part in pilgrimages, or just sat in silence while people worshiped.

Is it Buddhism or Christianity that Is Raining?

I shall never forget my first meeting with a Zen master in Kyoto.

"Why have you come here?" he asked. "You Christians too have meditation and prayer!"

I answered that we did indeed possess these things, but that I wanted to see Buddhism from within; and Buddhism surely had something to teach us Christians too.

"But why on earth are you so keen to learn about Buddhism—or indeed about Christianity?"

I must admit that I no longer felt quite so self-assured . . .

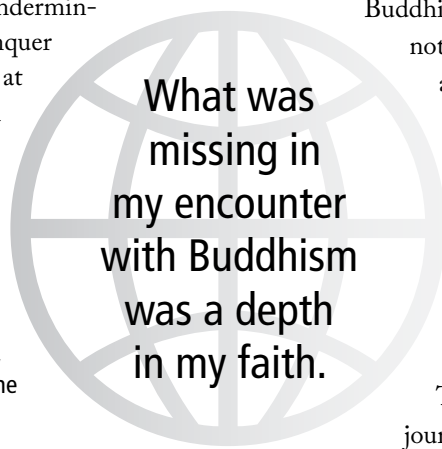
"It is raining outside tonight," continued the master.

We sat in silence and listened. The rain fell gently on the moss and herbs in the monastery garden. Then, suddenly, there came the impossible question:

"Is it Buddhism or Christianity that is raining?"

My thoughts darted around in the silence. But the rain gave me no answer.

"It is quite simply raining," he commented with a slight smile. "This is a question of *being*. All your theoretical thoughts about Buddhism and Christianity are separating you from the simple and fundamental matter: *to be*."



This was the first time it dawned upon me that faith could separate me from life, or rather, that speculations and pious explanations could build walls that shut out reality. Perhaps my faith would have to be demolished if I were to become a true Christian. And if the encounter with Christ did not help me *to be* in a way that was true, had I in fact encountered him?

Empty Explanations

This master had studied the Bible, and one day he put me to the test:

“The Sermon on the Mount says that we are not to worry about tomorrow. What does that really mean?”

What an opportunity for a testimony, I thought. I began to tell him about God’s loving care for us. He is our father, and we are the children he looks after.

“I know that,” he interrupted. “But what does it mean?”

I attempted to express myself more clearly:

“We believe in God’s providence. We have nothing to fear. Jesus compared this to the lilies in the field and the birds of heaven . . .”

Again, he interrupted me:

“Yes, I know all that, but what does it mean?”

Gently but ruthlessly, the surface of all my explanations was peeled back to reveal mere theology, theories and empty words. His point was not to humble me or to undermine my commitment to Christ. He just wanted to know the reality behind the words. How could I express basic Christian insights without theories, pious words, and intelligent explanations?

His point was not to undermine my commitment to Christ. He just wanted to know the reality behind the words. How could I express basic Christian insights without theories and pious words?

Forgetting God?

One day, the master told me how I should enter the hall of meditation:

“When you go into the hall, you must lay aside all your thoughts and ideas and concepts. Leave your theology behind you. Forget God!”

I pondered these words. Is this possible? And is it right? Eventually, I concluded that this paradoxical action could be profoundly Christian. A Buddhist too must lay aside all his

ideas—about Buddha, about enlightenment, about the path to salvation. He must (as it were) abandon Buddha at the entrance to the meditation hall. But the first thing he does on entering is to bow reverently before the statue of Buddha in the hall: he must forget Buddha, but Buddha is there. A Christian entering the meditation hall must lay aside all his theology and bid God farewell outside the meditation hall. But God is there when one enters—as near to us as our own breathing and heartbeat. Was that what Paul wanted to say in his Areopagos speech—“In Him we live and move and have our being”?

I am not saying that words are meaningless. Language is a wonderful instrument which can point to a reality beyond the boundaries of words. But it is too easy for us to succumb to a superstition about words and concepts, forgetting that there is indeed an *unutterable* dimension that lies beyond all our words. The mystery is situated between the *word* and that which is *unsaid*. It cannot be contained within our systems. It can only be praised in stuttering human words. If we are too keen to analyze it and define it, it crumbles away between our fingers.

Shaking Foundations

My early experiences with Buddhism in Japan led me into a critical process where I did not always know where I belonged. As a missionary, I was supposed to have the answers but discovered that I offered answers to questions that no one had put. Sometimes my Buddhist friends gave me insights that were truer than those I had read about in my books. They drew on sources unknown to me, and I had to ask myself whether these had any connection with my own sources. How could I search for their wisdom without abandoning my commitment to Christ?

In my dreams I tried to tell myself about the coming crisis. I could go from room to room in my childhood home, pour gasoline on the furniture and set fire to it. I stood in the pulpit in my underwear, trying to get hold of the manuscript of a sermon which had never been completed. The ground was cracking up in violent convulsions and there was no safe place to stand. I was on a ship tossed by the waves, terrified of the unknown forces that pulled me downward. Terrible dreams.

Then I remembered the stories my father told when I was a child: dramatic stories about typhoons over Hong Kong. Every time, we were astonished by the strange interplay between the forces of nature and the ten-thousand-tonners. The vessels that cut their moorings and put out to sea, into the teeth of the storm, survived; but some of the boats that remained in harbor, attached to their anchor chains and their moorings, were left as rows of wrecks along the harbor wall.

I was inspired by that to see that sometimes, God calls people to go out into the storm, where they must sink or swim—better to capsize with honor than to be hurled against the harbor wall and crushed! Now the storm rages over you. But after you have been whirled around by unknown forces for some time, life takes on a new meaning. Precisely at the point where you fear that the powers of chaos would suck you down into the depths, you realize something of which you had never before been completely certain: you believe. You feel like the first day of creation: out of chaos, newly created life is born.

I had the feeling the deeper I tried to grasp the secrets of Buddhism, the more I was inspired to investigate new dimensions of my Christian faith—not new, but neglected in my tradition.

When I later read Douglas Copeland's *Generation X*, I was stricken by the protagonist's discovery after a spiritual crisis, that "there is still something to believe in after there is nothing more to believe in." I might quote Paul Tillich who in one of his books writes that "The courage to be has its roots in the God who appears when God disappears in the anxiety of doubt."²

My early experiences somehow gave me a new freedom of openness and curiosity to combine my studies of Buddhism and Eastern traditions with an expectation that it might deepen my own understanding of the depth of Christianity. Somehow, I had the feeling that the deeper I tried to grasp the secrets of Buddhism, the more I was inspired to investigate new dimensions of my Christian faith—not new, indeed, but neglected in my tradition. It is a strange paradox that two incompatible religious or philosophical systems like Buddhism and Christianity have such a strong mutual attraction. Two quite contradictory systems of thought—at least when it comes to central issues—seem to come close, challenging and inspiring each other to understand what it means to be a true human being.

I tried to share some of my insights in two small books, *Who Can Stop the Wind?*³ and *Dear Siddhartha*. The first book is not a sophisticated theoretical discussion of commonalities and differences, but a report about encounters and experiences in the borderland where faith meets faith. The other is a follow-up, a collection of letters and stories of encounters between people from the East and the West. Both the letters and the encounters are fictions, but true in the sense that

they take place in the minds of people: What would Jesus and Buddha say if they had been able to dialogue? What happens when Laozi suddenly comes out of his book, riding on his black water buffalo asking me to explain who this Jesus is? Most of my fictions are based on well-documented historical encounters: the encounter between Alexander the Great and the Indian Sages; the apostle Thomas' experiences in India; Buddha becoming an object of veneration in medieval Europe; the interactions between Nestorian (Syriac) Christians and Buddhists and Taoists during the period of the Chang dynasty in China; Jesuits and Buddhist monks in Japan in the mid-sixteenth century; and similar encounters in Ceylon and Japan in the nineteenth century. Lastly, is it true that Jesus originally was a Buddhist, as argued by many modern admirers of the East?

These are books for the general reader. If there is any sophistication—and I think there is—it is implied in the stories, and the readers would have to find it for themselves. I have also written textbooks about Buddhism and alternative spirituality. I have translated Zen Buddhist texts for Norwegian readers and edited Taoist texts. I have completed four manuscripts about Japanese itinerant poets in the Buddhist tradition, with a literary biography and translations of their poems. And I have been challenged to write academic analyses of doctrinal questions and about interactions between Buddhists and Christians.

Why Buddhism?

Why is a Christian theologian so involved in dialoguing with Buddhism? For me it happens to be part of a family history. Karmic relations, a Buddhist might say. A Christian would perhaps call it divine providence. My concern is not primarily to find out the historical roots of Buddhism. I am more interested in what Buddhism has become for the millions of people who call themselves Buddhists, in particular, what is happening in my own Western cultural sphere nearly 2,500 years after his death. But my major reason for writing is to find out what Buddha means to me as a Christian. What traces has he left on my mind, on my dreams and longings and fears?

Towards a Greater Faith

We don't have time to go into details. But in a strange way all these efforts have been accompanied by a continual urge to search for a language for my own Christian faith, a language which I feel as my own. I have from time to time used the expression "towards a greater faith." "A greater faith" does not mean a stronger faith or a more self-confident conviction, not better arguments, or eloquent formulations, even though that might be desirable. It is about opening a greater

space in faith where there is room for my own life with all my tensions and inner contradictions. I need a space for faith and doubt, for my dreams and my despair. I need a space for the agnostic in me, the Jew, the Buddhist, the Muslim, the Hindu, the Animist, the secular humanist, and perhaps even the atheist. None of these are entirely strangers, for they accompany me in my inner dialogues; they inspire and challenge me, test my faith, and invite me to search for a language of faith with which I can identify. Perhaps I may also inspire others to discover and redefine their faith in an open space. For Christianity is not only the little piece of reality we have received from our various parochial varieties of faith. It is a great universe, a spacious landscape where people can enter and explore the terrain, and perhaps find a new language by hearing and speaking, seeing, and experiencing. We need fresh air, and we must be free to leave again.

A Christian Who Has Met Buddha: What, then, Is My Relationship to Buddhism?

I do not agree with those who claim that you have to choose: Buddha or Christ, Zen Way or Jesus Way.⁴ I would not say, like some people I know, that I am a Buddhist Christian, trying to create a sort of harmony between the two. I could not say, like Paul M. Knitter, that “without Buddha I could not be a Christian.”⁵ I cannot commit myself wholeheartedly to both Buddhism and Christianity at the same time, either, claiming a sort of complementary position, like Roger Gregory-Tashi Corless who was ordained both in the Christian and the Tibetan tradition. He, and some others, speak in a paradoxical way about an inseparable connection between two incompatible traditions.⁶ They are a hundred percent both, but not at the same time. If I should use a metaphor, I might say like the Dominican monk Oshida Shigeto, whom I met in Japan, “I am a Christian who has met Buddha.” I am perhaps close to what John Cobb describes as “beyond dialogue,” an encounter that leads to a mutual transformation of both.⁷

In most cases, however, it seems that most people will have their center of gravity and their definitive identity in one of the traditions, making space for impulses from or sympathies with the other. One is a Buddhist inspired and challenged by Christianity, or a Christian who in the encounter with Buddhism has been shaken and enriched by new insight and deeper commitment.

Identity and Change

What about identity? I am a professor of theology. I am a preacher with a message to share. I left home to convert the East, and instead I brought the East back home. I am playing with fictional encounters with Buddha and Laozi and other eastern philosophers and masters. I believe that I can

read the Bible with their eyes and learn something new. I describe myself as a Christian who has met Buddha. I speak of the “first love”—the great and lasting commitment to Jesus Christ—and the many other friendships and infatuations. But what about faithfulness and consistency? Isn’t God a jealous God who must be without any rivals? How can I then move freely in an open landscape where faith is enlarged? Will I become a postmodern chameleon that changes color to suit its surroundings? One cannot be everything to everyone!

Wondering about Wandering

Let me conclude by sharing some musings about personal changes and changes in one’s religious life.

Looking back on my life, I wonder whether I am still the little boy who ran barefoot on a mountain outside Hong Kong during the Second World War, who later lived in Kristiansand in southern Norway and in Oslo, who was for several years intensely active in Christian youth work in the pietistic tradition, who studied at the Faculty of Theology in the University of Oslo, who became a husband and the father of five children, who went to Japan as a missionary and researcher, who became a professor of theology at his Alma Mater, who is a grandfather, and who has now retired from his professional career?

Certainly, this is me. My body has changed, but I can still recognize it as my own. The freckles are still there, only a little faded and almost disappeared. Facial features that once were only a potential have become more marked, and no operation can remove them. The cells have been replaced many times—apart from the brain cells, millions of which die while a few new cells are added. But I recognize the same mental patterns, the movements, and reactions in my limbs and inside my body, the same irritating habits, the same weaknesses and strengths, the same cowardly evasiveness, and the same courage to start afresh when it is absolutely necessary.

I would not say, like some people I know, that I am a Buddhist-Christian, trying to create a sort of harmony between the two. I might say, “I am a Christian who has met Buddha.”

At the same time, I am someone else. I have changed. The child who was me, the young man, the thirty-year-old, the fifty-year-old: they are still me, but at the same time, they

are several personalities away from me. They are inside me as a kind of archeology of the mind, not congealed and petrified, but layer upon layer of consciousness and nerves, body and muscles which continually rise to the surface, or to which I return.

It strikes me that something similar has happened to my faith. I am nourished by the same scriptures that my father read in the daily family devotions, and by the same sacraments. I sing many of the same hymns and use the traditional words: God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit. The same friends and companions accompany me: Abraham and Moses, the prophets, Peter and John, Thomas and Judas, Paul and Augustine and Luther, and many others.

But although the names remain the same, they have changed their personality. God has changed many times. Even Jesus is not the same—or rather, they look different. I might say that while the subject of the sentence is the same, the predicates have changed, i.e., the words that give content to the subject and describe it. These words are different. I tell the same stories in other ways, and perhaps I tell alternative stories in order to indicate the problematic aspects of the old narratives. Many words have definitely disappeared. Some have lost their meaning, and I have been forced to search for new words. Some words have resurrected with new meaning. Most importantly, new names have appeared. There are many who have left their traces on my mind—both Christians and members of other religions, as well as a good many who have no faith at all. They have taught me decisive things about life and about true humanity, and even some basic things about God.

I discovered in the process that I was more Christian than I realized. Those who search for a new identity beyond all religious boundaries find it strange that I still identify myself

with the church and its worship, and with the entire Christian tradition with its good and its bad elements. Perhaps they think it is time to go further.

This is what I am trying to express in my musings about identity and plurality and changes. If I do have a Christian identity, it is not an isolated little world defined as “Christian,” but a commitment to Christ which creates a vast space for everything life has given me, both good and evil. Faith runs like a scarlet thread through all the contradictions. Christ becomes the profound field of gravitation that makes sense in my entire experience of life.

**I tell the same stories in other ways to
indicate problematic aspects
of the old narratives.
Words have disappeared, lost their
meaning, and been resurrected
with new meaning.**

Ultimately, it is a question of the first great love—which seems destined to become the last love too. I was marked with his sign on my forehead and breast at baptism, as testimony to my belonging. Even before then, the Creator had already marked me with his own image. From time to time, the Master has seemed remote and unreal, and I have wondered whether one might replace him with other masters. But then he has reappeared, more clearly and strongly. And it was not least the encounter with all the others that made him shine with a stronger brilliance. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ I worked as acting editor of *Japanese Religions* from 1973–1985, and published quite a few articles there. My doctoral work dealt with the encounter between Buddhism and Christianity in the late 19th century, *Buddhism and Christianity in Japan: From Conflict to Dialogue 1854–1899* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987).

² Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, Third Edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014 [1952, 2000]).

³ Notto R. Thelle, *Who Can Stop the Wind? Travels in the Borderland between East and West* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010). Published in Norwegian, *Hvem kan stoppe vinden?* (Oslo University Press, 1991). *Dear Siddhartha: Letters and dialogues in the borderland between East and West* is translated but not published. Norwegian original: *Kjære Siddhartha! Brev og samtaler i grenseland mellom Øst og Vest* (Oriens Forlag, 2005).

⁴ Like the Southern Baptist missionary Tucker Callaway argued in *Zen Way, Jesus Way* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 1976).

⁵ Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian* (Oneworld Publications, 2009).

⁶ Roger Corless, “The Coming of the Dialogian: A Transpersonal Approach to Interreligious Dialogue,” in *Dialogue and Alliance: A Journal of the International Religious Foundation* 7 (1993/2): 3–17; “A Form of Buddhist-Christian Coinherent Meditation,” in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 14 (1994): 139–144.

⁷ John B. Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue: Towards a Mutual Transformation of Buddhism and Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1982).

Pilgrimage Responses

Responses to Notto Thelle's, "My Pilgrimage in Christian-Buddhist Encounter: Lessons for Today's Practitioners"

Rory Mackenzie: Response One

Thank you, Dr. Thelle. I really enjoyed your paper full of insight and reflection, asking searching questions. I had the advantage of seeing it before hearing it and I thought of it as a great opportunity to reflect on my own journey. I thought parts of it could have been written for a post-Christendom, postmodern influenced young person. In fact, I ran a couple of quotes from your paper past two such people and they both said "Wow." I'm coming back to a point I tried to make earlier, that knowledge of Buddhist concepts and taking a conversational approach somehow equip us to engage with folks in contemporary Western societies. Folks who look within themselves and to their friends for the meaning of life, folks who have written their graffiti over organized religion but still look for some kind of spiritual practice. One of the quotes I noted was that "faith could separate me from life," and that's certainly true, at least in my experience. What I call faith in God somehow also includes my fears of the world as a scary place for Christians who want to live out their faith. My faith clearly is based to some extent on some false understandings that I still have of God. It's true that this imperfect faith has kept me out of trouble, but maybe it has also kept me from fully engaging in the world where God is at work. I think of Meister Eckhart, who is quoted as saying, "God rid me of God." He understood that his understanding of God was imperfect. Maybe we can pray, "God rid me of a faith that separates us from life, the full life that you have called us to." I think if you have time, perhaps you could respond a little bit and give some context about your meditation experiences. Just the way you've let go as you've gone in to sit, and how has that helped you? I'm thinking also about the kind of meditation model that you used, and perhaps even the support given by the meditation master. Thank you.

Notto Thelle Replies

Thank you for your response. I was moved by listening to you. It's interesting that you are in touch with the New Age or these sorts of alternative spirituality. I have made a lot of friends there, and actually I've often been asked to write for their journals. The last book I wrote in Norwegian, *The Silence and the Cry*, is a reflection on Christian spirituality. I was asked to write an article for this alternative network, their journal which is read by thousands of people. To me that is very challenging and inspiring. As for my

meditation practice, I studied Zen under Buddhist masters, but I discovered that was not my practice. It doesn't fit my body. And one easily becomes very self-occupied if one is too much into that type of meditation. So, I've ended up with a very simple morning meditation where I start with body movement. I did learn Tai Chi for a long period and that type of body movement. Is that Taoist or what is it? I think it's a good way to move for the body and prepare the body for quiet and silence. I combine that body movement with prayer and after many years of Bible reading, I decided now I'll skip the morning Bible reading and sing through the Norwegian hymnal, which is also based on the Bible, and that is also a great inspiration as a preparation for prayer. Then I sit in silence, but not in a formal way. I do as Luther said, "Read your Bible, say your prayers, and when you finish make the sign of the cross, and go out happy into the world." I could say more, but I think every person has to find his own or her own way of preparing for the day. For me, it's good to do this.

**I studied Zen under
Buddhist masters, but I discovered
it doesn't fit my body.
One easily becomes very
self-occupied if one is too much into
that type of meditation. (Thelle)**

Terry Muck: Response Two

Dr. Thelle, it is such a pleasure to listen to someone who has a theology, but manages to invite us into it, rather than keep us out with it. I appreciate what you had to say very much, but I think the thing I appreciate the most is that it feels like an invitation to have a talk with you; let's sit down and have a chat about this and compare notes and talk about these things.

A quick story. I was at an American Academy of Religion meeting, talking to some people who are pure critical thinkers, critical rationalists, for whom everything is kind of cut and dried. We were talking about dialogue and one of the participants said, "You know what really scares me in dialogue is people that come in and have this theology that they want to preach to me." I gave in to my angst there (maybe I shouldn't have?) raised my hand and said, "You know what really scares me are people who come into dialogue and think that they don't have any theology; those are the really frightening people." So, I appreciate the way you're able to talk about your faith in a way that invites me in but doesn't keep me out.

Amos Yong: Response Three

Dr. Thelle, I haven't had a chance to meet you in person and obviously this mediated digital encounter is not the same, but I have certainly appreciated reading what you have presented over the last couple of days. I also appreciate getting to know more of the life behind those texts that I read, particularly in light of some things I'm going to share in a few moments. What struck me was your comments at the very end, amidst all of the richness of your presentation, about your five children and, I assume, a number of grandchildren. I wonder how you feel about your legacy along this path, may it or may it not have been passed on to the next generation? Our children are with us on our journeys, and I'm just wondering if there's anything more you could share about ways in which your own path may be carried on by your children or maybe your grandchildren.

Notto Thelle Replies

That is a great challenge. We live in Norway and Norway is a very secular country and I think one of our great challenges is to find places and contexts where our children can feel at home in a Christian environment. My two elder children have, through music and singing, found a place in church connections through church choirs and so on. My eldest daughter is actually teaching Bible in America, in Wichita University. Of course, this topic becomes quite private, but three younger children have not found a real place where they can thrive. They're beautiful people but find it almost impossible to find a place where they can really live out their concerns in a church context. But it's fascinating, my son who is now in his 40s broke all patterns for many years and was a rock musician. He went to England for that because he did not want to study. Then he came back to Norway and found out that he wanted to study music, to have the theory on what he had practiced, and now he's a PhD student in music. He decided not to baptize his children, but just the other day I got a message for him saying "Dad, when you were in London in 2003, you preached a sermon in the Seamen's Church in London. There was something you said there

which grasped me very strongly. I don't remember exactly what it was, but it was something about abandoning your own power positions. Could you find that quotation?" I had to search back and discovered it was a sermon on the first Sunday in the Lenten period about the temptation of Jesus, in which I interpreted Jesus abandoning all his power, how he did not demonstrate his power and so on. And because sometimes when I preach, I listen to other voices from the sideline, I quoted also Lao Tsu in *Tao Te Ching*, beautiful expressions about abandoning power, about water always seeking the low place, that the power of water was the power of the valley, always seeking the lowest position and serving people. So, my thought is that preaching, teaching, talking to kids, anything, the only thing you can do is sow seeds which might grow. Does that respond to some extent to what you're asking?

**Abandoning power is like water.
The power of water was
the power of the valley, always
seeking the lowest position
and serving people.
(Lao Tsu in *Tao Te Ching*).**

Amos Yong Replies

Absolutely. Thank you very much for sharing that part of yourself as well. Our children are our closest companions in many ways, and it's not surprising that the path that you've been on is also. . . . When I think about music, the study of music, it takes us beyond ratiocination, beyond propositionality, toward engaging with other dimensions, cognitively and with our bodies, that I think are all parts of what you've actually lived into, beyond the things that you've said, so those are ways in which our journeys unfold. **IJFM**