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Michael Birkel

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QUAKER-BUDDHIST BLENdings

MICHAEL BIRKEL

From their beginning, Friends have benefited from the religious ideas and spiritual practices of other communities.¹ Such influences and confluences have always been a sign of spiritual openness and vitality among religious communities across history. Where, for example, would Augustine of Hippo, the most influential theologian in the history of Western Christianity, be without the insights of the pagan Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus? This essay considers two persons who identify as both Buddhist and Quaker yet define that relationship in complementary ways.

Like other Christians, such as Ruben Habito and Paul Knitter,² some Friends have explored the gifts of other-than-Christian communities. For some, this has led to a respectful borrowing of practices. For others, it has resulted in dual membership in Quakerism and another religion. Each of these poses challenges. Borrowers must consider the ethics of their actions, perhaps especially borrowers whose cultural histories include oppression and colonization of others. Dual believers have to face the competing demands of two religious systems with their different concepts of self, reality, divinity, worship, meditation, and ethics.

QUAKERS AND BUDDHISM IN NORTH AMERICA

Arguably the other religious tradition to which contemporary liberal Quakers are most attracted is Buddhism. With its traditions of meditation, compassion, and nonviolence, Buddhism feels compatible to many liberal, unprogrammed Quakers. Westernized forms of Buddhism—often divested of cultural expressions, rituals, hierarchies, apotropaic or theurgic practices, and its focus primarily on merit for non-monastics—appeals to the spiritual thirst of many North Americans who are dissatisfied with Christian and Jewish experience. Jewish Renewal leader Rabbi Zalman Schlachter-Shalomi described this as “Buddhism for export,” a tradition “stripped of the chthonic and ethnic things from Asia.”³ His following words on Jews who are involved in Buddhist practice could equally apply to many Quakers who explore Buddhism:

While it is true that we Jews have an aversion to icons that want to invite adoration, I don't believe that this touches Jews who are involved in Buddhism too much. The "Ju-Bus," people who do mostly Zen or Vipassana meditation, are not into the icons. I don't see too many Jews going to the *ao-honzon* [the main object of veneration] and chanting "*Namu myoho renae kyo*" ("Hail to the Lotus Sutra").⁴

Quaker philosopher and Zen practitioner Steve Smith expressed a similar sentiment in his pamphlet *A Quaker in the Zendo*, written after more than 20 years of Zen meditative practice, where he wrote that he anticipated an ongoing commitment to *zazen*, "Yet I remain detached from outward forms of Buddhist ritual. Out of deference and respect for tradition, I participate in various religious observances...These manifestations of traditional Japanese Soto Zen continue to feel alien to me, however; they do not express my own authentic religious impulses."⁵

North American Quaker interaction with Buddhist traditions and practitioners is nothing new. In the middle of the last century, Teresina R. Havens, who earned a doctorate in comparative religion from Yale University in 1933, published *Buddhist and Quaker Experiments with Truth: Quotations and Questions for Group or Individual Study*.⁶ In 1966 Quaker philosopher Douglas Steere sought to initiate a Christian-Zen encounter with Japanese Buddhists.⁷

Mary Rose O'Reilley's *The Barn at the End of the World: The Apprenticeship of a Quaker, Buddhist Shepherd*⁸ is a brilliant, honest, and frequently hilarious account of her time exploring the intricacies of sheep farming in a Minnesota barn and learning Buddhist teachings and practices in Plum Village in France, a community founded by Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. Her reflections reveal a person deeply enriched by her encounter with Buddhist thought, practice, and practitioners.

Interestingly, in the title of her book she chose to punctuate the relationship between Buddhism and Quakerism with a comma rather than a hyphen. She is an English professor, so presumably this was a deliberate choice. A hyphen connects, while a comma separates. She tends to keep her discussion of Buddhism separate from her consideration of Quakerism in this book. She does not tell a story of formally joining the Buddhist community. Many contemporary Friends are similarly disinclined toward multiple belonging, content to borrow from Buddhism what suits them.

Thich Nhat Hanh himself has spoken on dual identity in this way, responding to the question, “Should Christians who are attracted to Buddhist teachings become Buddhists?”

Christians who know how to generate mindfulness, concentration and insight are already Buddhist...even if they don't call themselves Buddhist, because the essence of Buddhism is mindfulness, concentration and insight...they don't need to wear the label “Buddhist.”...When a Christian embraces the Buddhist practice correctly, he will never be uprooted from his Christian heritage...I think there are enough Buddhists; we don't need to convert more people to Buddhism.⁹

Other Quakers have chosen dual affiliation, formally joining both Buddhist and Quaker communities. Valerie Brown and Sallie King can serve as two complementary approaches to dual religious identification. While both recognize affinities as well as differences between Quakerism and Buddhism, Valerie Brown has an interest in bringing the two traditions together, while Sallie King tends to keep them separate. Each offers an enriching encounter.

VALERIE BROWN

Valerie Brown identifies as both Quaker and Buddhist. Raised a Roman Catholic, she is active as a member of the Religious Society of Friends, and she was ordained by Vietnamese Zen Buddhist Master Thich Nhat Hanh as a layperson in his Tien Hiep Order. She is also a certified teacher of Kundalini yoga. Trained as an attorney and experienced as a lobbyist, she is a facilitator for the Center for Courage and Renewal, a leadership coach, and an educator in mindfulness. She has written essays that have been published as pamphlets by the press of the Quaker retreat center Pendle Hill.¹⁰

Valerie Brown feels led to promote traditionally Buddhist practices among Friends, particularly the practice of mindfulness as articulated by Thich Nhat Hanh. Mindfulness can enhance the Quaker quest to encounter the Light within oneself and others.¹¹ Further, Buddhist meditation seeks to “hold divergent feelings and sensations in awareness,” thus balancing energies in a way that can clarify the process of discernment. She identifies the Light of God within each person with the universal Buddha nature.¹² She finds a harmonization between Buddhist meditation and Quaker silent meeting for worship, as well as other similarities. The Buddhist practice of lovingkindness

is akin to Christian prayer. The Quaker peace testimony “roughly equates with the Buddha’s teaching on love.”¹³ The doctrine of Right Speech in the Buddhist Eightfold Path resonates with Quaker vocal ministry.¹⁴ She compares Quaker meeting with the Zen tea ceremony and notes common values of respect, purity, and tranquility.¹⁵ Having worked to establish a common ground between the two traditions, she then recommends that Friends can adopt some Buddhist practices. Meditation can teach Quakers a stable position through proper posture that can enhance their worship and reacquaint them with the role of the body in the spiritual life.¹⁶ She suggests that Buddhist practices of meditation and mindfulness and that Buddhist principle of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path “can transform and enliven Quaker spirituality.”¹⁷ She assures Friends that in “practicing Buddhist teachings as Quakers, we recognize that we are never far from our Buddha-nature, our enlightened self.”¹⁸

SALLIE KING

Sallie King offers reflections on her own personal experience of dual belonging. She is not an evangelist for Buddhist practice among Friends. Instead, she shows her readers how she can be both and yet integrate them into one eloquent life. She is a scholar, especially of socially engaged Buddhism, the recent movement among some Buddhists to work for social change for greater justice.¹⁹ Sallie King has also been a religious activist, involved in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, in religiously based efforts to promote peace, and in spreading the message of socially engaged Buddhism in traditionally Buddhist societies where that is a recent concept.

Sallie King has written about her dual religious identity, most directly in her essay “The Mommy and the Yogi”²⁰ and in her article “Religious Practice: A Zen-Quaker Internal Dialogue.”²¹ Growing up as a “generic Protestant” in a military family, she found it impossible to reconcile what she discerned as the pacifist teachings of Jesus with her military environment. Further, the notion of a benevolent, all-powerful deity clashed with her awareness of the vastness of human suffering. She found solace and sense in the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, which she encountered as identifying and confronting the problem of suffering and eventually joined a Zen Buddhist community and took up the practice of meditation, drawn to the focus on experience rather than submission to external authority. She became

a scholar and professor of Buddhism. Historically, much of Buddhist literature on meditation and philosophy derives from a monastic setting. Parenting young children brought challenges that the classical tradition did not address, and she found herself attending and then joining a Quaker meeting, not as a replacement for Buddhism but rather as a complement fully compatible with it. Unlike many Quakers who then also join Buddhism, Sallie King was first a Buddhist and then afterwards also joined Quakerism.

Sallie King finds both Zen Buddhism and Quakerism to be doctrinally flexible, locating truth primarily in experience and regarding verbal formulations and conceptual schemes as secondary and provisional. For her, the Buddhist concept of a universal Buddha nature and the Quaker belief in the Light within every person are harmonious. Each tradition offers different strengths: Buddhism with its philosophy and meditative practices and Quakerism with its “manner of bringing spirituality into the worldly life of lay people.” She values the egalitarian impulse in Quakerism and its practice of corporate decision making.²² As a community historically grounded in the wider Christian tradition, Quakerism spoke of love, a bond or attachment to this world, and a fruit of the Spirit. This passionate love, in her experience as a mother, differed from the cool detachment of Buddhist teachings on compassion, yet it aligned with Buddhism in that it entailed a forgetting of self.

Sallie King cannot be accused of turning Quakerism into a whatever-you-want-it-to-be religion. She finds a core to Quaker faith and practice. In her essay “Friends and Other Religions,”²³ she describes Quakerism as a religion based on “an illumination that is simultaneously Christian and Universalist.” It affirms “the living Spirit of God as a Reality that transcends all names and forms” and that is present universally in a people. At the same time the “language, imagery and inspiration” of Quaker faith is Christian. While Friends avoid creeds, Quaker testimonies of truth, nonviolence, equality, and simplicity, combined with the practice of submission to the guidance of the Spirit, form an identifiable center that is “clear and not to be compromised.”

Sallie King is cautious about mixing the two religions inappropriately. In her experience, they offer different strengths. “If these traditions were the same, there would not be any point to me in practicing both of them. They are compatible, but not the same at all.”²⁴ She readily acknowledges that Buddhism is prominent in

her conceptualization of religious categories of thought, such as emptiness, but Buddhism has emphasized this philosophical dimension more than Quakerism has—and Buddhism rather than Quakerism has been the focus of her professional scholarly undertakings. At the same time, she freely confesses that she has found it impossible to accept much of Buddhist doctrine on karma and reincarnation. She tells of admitting this to a Zen teacher, whose response was that if such teachings do not work for her, she should ignore them.²⁵ Again, doctrinal formulations are not the core of either Buddhism or Quakerism. Instead, the focus is on action. Buddha nature is not so much a concept as a set of actions that invites everyone to act like a Buddha and to lessen the suffering of the world. This is akin to her description of the core of Quakerism as the living out of ethical principles or testimonies. This concern with principled, compassionate living that seeks to better the world is witnessed in Sallie King's scholarship. She is deeply trained in classical Chinese and Japanese texts, but much of her work as a scholar and as a religious activist focuses on socially engaged Buddhism, as noted above.

Reflecting on these two Buddhist Quakers, it might be fair to say that Valerie Brown's concern is to bring Buddhist practices to Quakerism in order to enrich Quaker spirituality, while Sallie King's focus as an activist is to encourage Buddhists to engage in reforms for social justice—an area of concern that has historically been much more central to Quakers than to Buddhists. Taken together, they demonstrate two complementary possibilities for Quaker and Buddhist elements to enhance the inward life of contemplation and the outward life of social change.

From its start, the Quaker heritage has been one of both universalism and Christian particularity: the Light that enlightens everyone was understood as the Light of Christ that entered human history. The complexity of this dual focus has always come to expression in a variety of spiritual vitalities. Some Friends have focused on the Christian identity to the near exclusion of the universalist dimension; others vice versa. The Quaker tradition is not static but rather unfolding, and, as with other Christian communities, its interactions with other traditions is a witness to this vitality.

ENDNOTES

1. As a recent example, see Michael Birkel, "Robert Barclay and Kabbalah," *Quaker Studies* 21/1 (June 2016): 3-13.

2. See Ruben Habito, *Living Zen, Loving God*, (Boston: Wisdom, 2008), or Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009).
3. Harold Kasimow, John P. Keenan, and Linda Klepinger Keenan, *Beside Still Waters: Jews, Christians, and the Way of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom, 2003), p. 89.
4. Kasimow, Keenan, and Keenan, *Beside Still Waters*, p. 89.
5. Steve Smith, *A Quaker in the Zendo* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 2003), pp. 9-10.
6. Teresina R. Havens, *Buddhist and Quaker Experiments with Truth; Quotations and Questions for Group or Individual Study* (Philadelphia: Religious Education Committee, Friends General Conference, 1950). See also her *Mind What Stirs in Your Heart* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1992).
7. Douglas V. Steere, *On Being Present Where You Are*, (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1967).
8. Mary Rose O'Reilley, *The Barn at the End of the World: The Apprenticeship of a Quaker, Buddhist Shepherd* (Minneapolis: Milkweed, 2000).
9. <http://plumvillage.org/thich-nhat-hanh-interviews/thich-nhat-hanh-answers-weekly-magazine/>
10. Valerie Brown, *Heartfulness: Renewing Heart, Mind, and Spirit on Retreat and Beyond* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 2013); also Valerie Brown, *Living from the Center: Mindfulness Meditation and Centering for Friends* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 2010); also Valerie Brown, *The Mindful Quaker: A Brief Introduction to Buddhist Wisdom for Friends* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 2006).
11. Brown, *Mindful Quaker*, 6.
12. *Ibid.*, 7.
13. *Ibid.*, 9.
14. *Ibid.*, 11.
15. *Ibid.*, 21-23.
16. *Ibid.*, 18-19, 26.
17. *Ibid.*, 32.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Sallie King's books include the following: Sallie B. King, *Being Benevolence: the Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005); Sallie B. King, *Buddha Nature* (New York: SUNY Press, 1991); Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); Myo do Satomi and Sallie B. King, *Passionate Journey: The Spiritual Autobiography of Satomi Myo do* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987); Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009).
20. Sallie B. King, "The Mommy and the Yogi" in Kasimow, Keenan, and Keenan, *Beside Still Waters*, pp. 157-170.
21. Sallie B. King, "Religious Practice: A Zen-Quaker Internal Dialogue" *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 14 (1994), pp. 157-62.
22. King, "The Mommy and the Yogi," 161.
23. Sallie B. King, *Friends and Other Religions* (Philadelphia, PA: QuakerBooks of FGC, 2003).
24. King, "Religious Practice," 161.
25. *Ibid.*, 160.