

FROM ZEN BUDDHISM TO CHRISTIANITY

Ellis Potter¹

I was a Zen Buddhist monk for quite a while. More and more these days, a Buddhist or a mystic or some kind of transcendental somebody will be your neighbour. So how do you love them? Well, probably from a certain distance. But I think to really love someone you get a little closer and you find out something about them. What is your life like? How do you cope with it? What do you hope for? What do you do about your guilt? Or don't you believe in guilt? These kinds of questions can be very useful in getting next to a person and finding out something about them. Then you are enabled to love them, to care about them, and to develop credibility so that you might actually say something into their lives that they will be willing to listen to because you have listened to them.

God made me a Christian but before that he made me a human being. That may sound rather obvious but it seems to me that sometimes Christians forget that they're human beings. All the Christians I know are human beings. All the Buddhists I know are human beings. All the Christians I know are sinners. This is very inconvenient and disappointing but it's a fact of life. And all the Buddhists I know are sinners. So we have two big things in common – we're human and we're sinners – so we have a lot to talk about with Buddhists. You don't want to start talking about religion. Start talking about being a human being and being sinners. And then you can have a face-to-face conversation that's not about who's right and who's wrong.

Buddhism teaches that in the beginning there was perfect unity. Thousands of years ago people looked around them and saw and experienced a very strong unity in reality. There's one earth, one sky, one sun, one moon, one human race, one cycle of day and night, one cycle of four seasons, one water cycle. There's a very strong unity, and that unity is stable. So they reasoned that, because of the stability of unity, the perfection of the beginning was unity. So reality is truly, fundamentally one.

1 Ellis Potter is a Christian minister, missionary and lecturer. A native Californian now residing in Switzerland, he is a former Buddhist monk who became a Christian under the influence and ministry of the late Francis Schaeffer. He worked for many years with Dr. Schaeffer at L'Abri Fellowship, Switzerland and was the pastor of the Basel Christian Fellowship for 10 years. With his wife, Mary, he founded Eastern European Renewal (EER), an evangelical mission to Central and Eastern European countries. He can be contacted at ellispotter@csi.com.

We suffer because somehow we have the illusion of the experience of diversity, so we look for a solution in the unity. This is the basic idea of the whole New Age movement. All the different aspects of the New Age movement can be summarised in the statement, “All is one”. This is the great evangelistic cry of the New Age movement. All is one. Peace and love, brother. All is one.

It’s a very powerful gospel of unity. If all is one, you are God. Well, that’s not so bad. But if all is one, you are me. Ah, well then, we begin to have doubts. If all is one you are the moon and you are the Milky Way and you are the whole galaxy. Because it’s not just a slogan, it’s a real belief, a real understanding of reality, that everything is basically one. And it’s very attractive because if everything is one, no one is going to disagree with anyone, no one is going to fight, no one is going to misunderstand, no one is going to be lonely. All problems are solved if everything is one.

A drop of water

There are many ways of illustrating this. Take a drop of water. A drop of water has lots of problems. He worries about evaporation, he is lonely, he is frustrated because the purpose of water is to have fish swim in it but he’s too small. So there are lots of stresses and problems for a drop of water. What is the solution to his problems? If he would drop into the ocean and become one with the all, his problems are over. He’s no longer lonely, there’s no more isolation, he doesn’t worry about evaporation, fish swim in him.

Now this would be a Buddhist illustration of their exegesis of the biblical passage, “You must lose your life in order to find your life”. Your pastor probably exegetes this a bit differently. Buddhist missionaries read the Bible and they see in the Bible many things that remind them of their Buddhist understanding of reality, and this is one of the big ones. You must lose your life in order to find your life. So the drop of water has a life but it’s not a very good life. It’s a life full of problems. If he will lose his life by becoming one with the all he will find his life in unity. You see how close the counterfeit is. You see, it’s a gospel. It’s a powerful gospel. It’s a false gospel. It’s a way of salvation and, if the Bible is true, it’s a false way of salvation. But it’s not weak, it’s very attractive.

So we have an illusion of diversity when reality is totally unified. It’s like a bad dream. And what is the solution to a bad dream? You wake up. And that’s exactly the solution – enlightenment, awakening. You do various therapies, various practices of meditation or yoga or pottery-making or something and you wake up into a realisation of total unity. And then you are free. Then you are saved. You are enlightened.

Have you heard of mantra? Mantra is where you take words that mean something and repeat them over and over aloud and then inside your head until they become sound and then they become vibration. And they become the vibration of the

cosmos. They become the very fine vibration of the electrons in the atom, the basic vibration of all matter. The function of the mantra is to put us in tune with this basic vibration of the cosmos and that is why in the New Age movement you have the concept of good vibes. These are the good vibes. The good vibes are the vibrations of salvation, the vibrations of unity in all reality. This is one function of mantra. The other function is to destroy language because all language is relationship and relationships are evil.

If everything is one, relationships are evil because you only have relationships when you have diversity, so you have to destroy language to be saved in order to have a total unity. And if everything is one then hatred is evil because hatred is a relationship. And love is evil because love is a relationship. It's the relationships that are the problem, so we need to escape from relationships. We all understand and experience that relationships are the problem. Just get married and you realise that relationships are the problem. Biblically they are also the solution. But in Buddhism they are the problem and the solution is to transcend relationships.

My teacher, my guru, wrote a book called *Buddha is the Centre of Gravity*. It's a very good title for a book about Zen. Do you know what the centre of gravity means? Your body has a centre of gravity, every ship has a centre of gravity, every object has a centre of gravity, and it's very important, but how can you describe the centre of gravity? What colour is it? What shape is it? How much does it weigh? The centre of gravity is nothing. It is a point that is real but it is nothing. It is just the centre. And that's why centring is so important a concept in the New Age movement, in the pottery, in the meditation, in the yoga, in the posture. Centring is an essential thing because when you centre, and you come to the centre of the centre of the centre, you are free.

I want to tell you these things so you might be able to get an understanding of the hope that is in Buddhists. And this is something that is really a way to talk to people. To ask, Oh, you're a Buddhist, tell me about being a Buddhist. What does it mean for you? What do you do? Are your parents and grandparents Buddhists? Is that why you're a Buddhist or did you convert to Buddhism? You see, all of these questions are non-threatening. They're non-challenging. They're just saying, let me know you. You're interesting to me.

The elephant

In the New Age movement there's a very popular teaching that involves an elephant. The elephant is a symbol of absolute truth, and we are all blind trying to find what is truth. The first blind person finds the tail of the elephant and says, Ah, the elephant is like a rope. The next blind person finds a leg and says, No, no, the elephant is like a tree. The third one finds the nose and says, No, the elephant is like a hose. The fourth one comes to the side and says, No, no, the elephant is like a wall. So they each have different experiences of the elephant.

The elephant is too big for them to embrace and experience the whole thing so they are confronted with a choice. They can either believe in the validity of their own experience of the elephant and decide that all the others are wrong, and argue and fight and kill each other. Or they can respect each other's faith journeys and realise that all experiences are experiences of the elephant, so we should live together in peace and tolerance. Have you heard this line of reasoning before? They train their missionaries with this elephant story.

But I have a problem with this elephant. He's available to be discovered but he doesn't say anything about himself. The absolute truth of the Bible isn't silent and passive. He tells us about himself. He says, Here's what I'm like: I'm compassionate, I give law, I am faithful, I keep my promises, I am the same yesterday, today and forever. He is personal and communicative. The elephant represents absolute truth as less complex than those seeking him. I can't accept this. It's not reasonable.

Of course, someone who believes in the elephant will say that you don't find salvation by reason, you find salvation by faith. Now the conversation changes because you say, Well, I am saved by faith but my faith is a reasonable faith and when it becomes unreasonable then I have to start asking a lot of questions about my faith. When I was a Buddhist studying Christianity, one of the reasons I became a Christian was because it became clear to me that it takes less faith to believe in Christianity than to believe in anything else.

People are capable of tremendous faith. A person is capable of believing anything. People can believe that the earth is flat so strongly that they are prepared to die or kill for their faith, but the earth is still not flat. So I'm very suspicious of faith. I think we should have just a small faith as Jesus said, faith like a mustard seed. If the faith is too big then I have faith in faith and not faith in Jesus. This is the main reason I became a Christian because there was so much evidence that corresponded so fully to reality as I lived it myself and as I experienced it in the world around me.

Often, when I meet non-Christians, I ask them to describe the God that they don't believe in. And if they do I congratulate them and say that I'm so glad they don't believe in a God like that, that I would never believe in a God like that. What a horrible thing it would be to have a God like that. Really, you're free from a terrible trap. And they say, But you're a Christian. Yes, I'm a Christian but I don't believe in a God like that. And then, you see, you talk as human beings, you open up a way of communicating and really understanding as one human being to another.

The idea of unity is the second strongest idea in the world. The strongest is the crucifixion. If the idea of unity wasn't so strong you wouldn't have two billion people with this worldview. It's not weak, it's strong and very attractive but it's wrong and it's an enemy of the gospel. As Christians we need to understand something about it and what people are hoping for so that we can love them and help them find the truth.