Deepening the Heart of Wisdom:
A Course in Buddhist and Christian Contemplative Practices and Dialogue

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A dozen seminarians and a professor file into a high-ceilinged, wood-paneled lounge in the main building of their campus. The left half of the room features a padded window seat beneath a bay of tall, leaded-glass windows, a coffee table, and a group of upholstered chairs around the table, facing the windows. On the right side of the room is a paneled wall, featuring painted portraits of white men in academic robes, hung well above eye level. On the floor, lining this wall, is a tidy row of rectangular black mats, each surmounted by round black *zafu* or a meditation bench. Nearest the double entry doors, two or three chairs face the wall. Opposite the door is a marble fireplace and mantle, also surmounted by a portrait. A few feet in front of this, in the center of the room, is a small wooden table, on which the most prominent object is a cube-shaped white pedestal. Upon the pedestal rests a miniature carved, wooden chair, which is empty. To the viewer's left of the chair is a small vase of flowers; to the right is a lit white candle. In front of the pedestal are a small, glass vessel of water and two censers: one a round, ceramic bowl full of packed grey ash, the other a lacquer box with two compartments. The larger compartment is also full of packed ash; upon the ash rests a small, glowing charcoal. The smaller compartment contains a neat pile of incense composed of tiny wood chips and fragrant granules.

As the students enter the room, each steps through the open left side of the doorway (the right side of the door is closed). They enter on the left foot, take two steps forward, press palms together in a prayer-like gesture called *gasshō*, and bow from the waist in the direction of the empty chair. Each then curls the fingers of the left hand around the thumb, places the

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hand against the solar plexus, rests the right palm on top of the left fist, and walks forward, keeping the row of upholstered chairs on the left and the altar table containing the empty chair on the right. Just beyond the table, each person turns right and passes behind it with a slight bow, then proceeds to one of the chairs or zafus along the wall on the right side of the room. Arriving at a seat, each makes *gasshō*, bows to the seat, turns 180 degrees clockwise and bows in *gasshō* toward the windows on the opposite side of the room, sits on a *zafu* and turns clockwise toward the wall, or steps around the back of a chair to sit facing the wall. The people settle themselves into upright postures, hands folded in their laps in the "cosmic mudra," the fingers of the left hand on top of the fingers of the right, with thumb-tips touching gently. They place the tips of their tongues on their upper palates, behind their front teeth, and direct their gazes downward toward a point on the wall in front of them. They then bring their attention to their breaths, as they flow in and out.

A professor, wearing black robes, enters the room in a similar way but sidesteps to the right, in front of the altar, holding a burning stick of incense between the fingers of both hands. She bows again, sidesteps left, walks toward the altar, sidesteps to the right in front of it, touches the base of the incense stick to her forehead and places it upright in the round censer with the fingers of her right hand, making *gasshō* with her left. With her right hand she gathers a pinch of powdered incense, elevates it to her forehead, and sprinkles it on the burning coal in the rectangular censer, then adds a second pinch. Tendrils of fragrant smoke curl upward and dissipate. Making *gasshō* with both hands, she sidesteps again to the right, bows, turns clockwise toward the door, and walks back to the place where she had first bowed before the altar. She retrieves a folded cloth bowing mat from where it has been tucked into the long left sleeve of her robe, spreads it on the floor just so, and makes three prostrations. She then folds

the bowing mat back into her sleeve, sidesteps left, bows again from the waist, and proceeds behind the altar as the others have done. In front of the fireplace, she bows to her *zafu*, turns clockwise, bows to the room, and sits, folding her voluminous robes neatly and facing the center of the room, with the backs of her students on her left. Once she is settled, she strikes a bowl-shaped brass bell three times with a padded wooden striker, letting each tone reverberate for many seconds before the next strike. She sets the striker down gently and folds her hands into the cosmic mudra for about twenty minutes of *zazen*.

On some mornings, the robed professor rises and makes small adjustments to students' postures. Sometimes she offers a few words of instruction. Mostly, everyone sits in silence until she rings the bell again. Everyone bows then, slowly rises, fluffs a zafu quietly, bows again toward the seats from a standing position, then turns clockwise to face the room. When everyone is ready, they bow as one, in *gasshō*. Beginning with the person nearest the door, the students and their two professors file back behind the altar to the opposite side of the room, and take places along the window seat or in the upholstered chairs, ready to engage in one of several forms of Christian contemplative prayer.

On this day, the students take their seats in the upholstered chairs, while a few of them assist the Christian professor in lighting votive candles, placed in the shape of a cross on a table in their midst. After the candles are all lit, the students and professors use pre-printed service leaflets on which are found the Taizé chants that will form the contemplative basis of this morning's Christian practice. A recording of the Taizé chant is used to support the student chanting, allowing those who do not feel comfortable chanting to hum quietly, supported by those who are chanting and by the recorded music. Several minutes of "Jesus Remember Me" is chanted quietly. Then a period of silence follows. A student then reads a short passage from

Christian scripture, followed by more silence. Then the next chant begins, a short version of the "Magnificat" in Latin. After that chant comes another period of silence followed by a litany of intercessory prayer. The service concludes with a third chant, "Ubi Caritas," also sung in Latin. When the session is ended, the students assist the professor in extinguishing the candles and then sit quietly and spend some time journaling. They take a fifteen-minute break and reconvene in a classroom in which rectangular tables are arranged in a large square before a blackboard, to discuss the three course texts. All of the texts are examples of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, originally sponsored or inspired by the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies.[1] In addition to these texts, students have been required to purchase the *zafu* and *zabuton* sets they used for *zazen*.

This is not the way class usually begins in a Protestant seminary. But this is not a typical seminary course: it is "Deepening the Heart of Wisdom, Buddhist Christian Contemplative Practice and Dialogue," offered as a two-week intensive at Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School (CRCDS) in January 2012. The professors, the co-authors of this article and now the co-editors of this journal, are an Episcopal priest who is an adjunct member of the seminary faculty and has a long-standing contemplative practice, and a Sōtō Zen priest who teaches religious studies at a secular school seventy-five miles away. The course emerged from a year of Buddhist-Christian dialogue between the instructors, which later blossomed into these other collaborations.

After the daily Zen practice led by Wakoh, Denise or a guest she has invited introduces a Christian practice. Taizé-style chanting as described above; *lectio divina*, a practice of slowly contemplating a scriptural passage; praying with an icon; praying the Rosary; an Ignatian spiritual exercise in which we visualized ourselves as various characters in a gospel story; two

other guided meditations; chanting of psalms in plainsong; and the Jesus Prayer. The area we use for these practices is decorated with candles, crosses, icons, and other Christian symbols, which vary from day to day depending upon the practice being taught. The space arrangement is not ideal, as it is somewhat crowded and the furniture is not conducive to good prayer or meditative postures, but we make do, given the limited options at CRCDS. Although these contemplative practices have long histories in Christian tradition generally, most are new to our largely Protestant students. One practice we do not do is Centering Prayer, which at least one student regrets. In retrospect, we still think that was the right decision. Centering Prayer is similar to *zazen* in many respects, and some students have difficulty *not* "Christianizing" *zazen* along the lines of Centering Prayer, as we will explain below. So it seems to us preferable not to reinforce this temptation; we want to keep the Buddhist and Christian contemplative practices distinct for purposes of comparison.

The Structure of this Blended Course

We developed this course because we both know from experience that in modern seminary education, particularly in Protestant seminaries, there is surprisingly little in the theological curriculum that engages students in spiritual practices. Much of the education is based upon studying biblical texts, theology, history, and other academic subjects. Even so-called "practical theology" courses tend to be focused on practical matters related to the work of ordained ministry, such as preaching and pastoral care and church administration. "Spiritual" or "religious" experiences are almost exclusively reserved for chapel (or All School Worship, as it is called at CRCDS). The trend in contemporary seminary education is for students to engage in their theological formation while also working full- or part-time, managing family lives and commuting. The days of compulsory chapel attendance in seminary are over, and the

reality is that many seminarians never or very infrequently attend a worship or prayer service in their seminary communities. What this means is that people who are being formed for Christian religious leadership do not actually spend much time in the course of their theological education engaging in religious or spiritual practices other than those of their sponsoring churches or the churches where they are doing field education. A course that uses contemplative pedagogy, therefore, offers something to seminary students that is sorely missing in contemporary Protestant theological education.

In the field of interfaith dialogue and education, much is written about the process of interreligious conversation and study, much of it focused on sharing ideas, doctrines, theories, and scriptural teachings, and/or sharing myths and other narratives. This course, in contrast, offered an opportunity for students to engage in an interfaith dialogue of experiences and practices. Most of the students were Christians of various denominations, and we invited them not merely to read and talk about Buddhism, but to engage in Buddhist practice as a significant part of their learning process. We did this because Buddhist teachings about the nature of reality and the causes of suffering cannot be understood very well unless one actually engages in practices designed to cultivate this understanding. In addition, students learned about and engaged in Christian spiritual practices, which enabled them to evaluate those practices in light of what they learned through Buddhist practices.

The three-credit course was offered as an elective that fulfilled a distribution requirement for a multi-cultural course in the MDiv and MA degree programs at CRCDS, an ecumenical Christian seminary originally founded by Baptists. The CRCDS student body now represents a variety of Protestant denominations: Baptist, United Methodist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Unitarian Universalist, various African American

churches, and a smattering of "others." Our class included a range of students typical of the CRCDS demographic, with the exception of African American church students, who are considerably less likely to take courses of an interreligious nature, because their theology tends more toward exclusivism and they do not see interreligious dialogue or education as relevant to their understanding of sharing the gospel with others. Ten of the twelve students enrolled for credit and two audited. Most were MDiv students, preparing for ordination in their respective denominations, although some were not ordination-bound and one enrolled as a Graduate Certificate Student, testing the waters to see whether a master's program would be right for her.

We met for just under three hours each weekday morning for two weeks, and took two afternoon field trips: one to the Rochester Zen Center and one to the Abbey of the Genesee, a Cistercian monastery in nearby Piffard, New York. We wanted the students to experience contemplative spirituality in monastic settings where they are regularly practiced.

On the first day, we began in the academic classroom, going over the syllabus, course expectations, assignments, general introductions, and the like. We then went to the meditation space, where Wakoh explained the arrangement of the altar and taught basic *zendo* practices. She had chosen to use an empty chair as the focal point on the altar, both because this was a traditional way of representing the Buddha before Buddhists began making anthropomorphic representations, and because it was less likely to trouble theists conditioned to see a Buddha figure as an "idol" to which one should not bow. She told students that they could think of the chair as containing any embodiment of wisdom and compassion they liked, if they wished. She showed them how to enter and leave the room; how to position their hands while walking, bowing, and sitting; how to move around the altar when walking to and from their meditation cushions or chairs; and the details of the seated *zazen* posture. She was exacting about these,

because attention to such details *is* the pedagogical method of Sōtō Zen training. The highly formalized ritual details require one's full attention, cultivate an attitude in which ordinary activities are experienced as sacred, and help one to notice one's habits of mind, as one silently observes passing thoughts, reactions to sensory stimuli, and breathing.

Students left their shoes outside the room and were expected to maintain silence once they entered each morning, until the Christian practices began. After the first day, students were instructed to be in their seats a few minutes before the meditation bell rang at exactly 9 a.m. Seminary students are not known for their punctuality, but in this course they learned quickly that coming late was a bad idea. Wakoh closed the door when class began, and any latecomer soon learned that late arrivals did not go unnoticed, and significantly disrupted the quiet in the room. By the third day, students not only arrived punctually, many were on their cushions twenty or thirty minutes early.

By the third day we instructors noticed that the atmosphere in our meditative space had changed significantly. The fidgetiness, tension, uncertainty, and discomfort that could be felt during the meditative silence on the first couple of days had subsided, as the students became more comfortable with the sitting practice and found ways to adjust their bodies to the sitting posture. The silence began to feel calm, deep and profound. A sense of community built as we sat in silence together. This sense of centered, meditative community was affirmed on the fourth day, when a guest Christian practitioner visited to lead an Ignatian exercise. She commented afterward that she could feel the depth of the silence when she entered the room, as we completed our Zen practice and moved to the Christian space. We invited the Dean of the seminary to join us the following week, and she too remarked upon the profoundly peaceful atmosphere that pervaded the lounge through this week of shared practice.

The Experience of Contemplative Learning

We instructors noticed that the atmosphere in the academic classroom, and the quality of the discussion of students' experiences, the texts, and the films we showed during the academic portions of class were more focused and deeper than is usually the case in a seminary classroom. Although seminarians tend to be an intense and engaged student population, the centered and grounded feel in the classroom was palpable when we convened after our seventy-five to ninety-minute sessions of contemplative practice. Students were more present to one another and to the instructors, and there was considerably less evidence of web-surfing and other forms of "drifting" that so often occur in the contemporary classroom. The fruit of the contemplative practice was that these students were better situated to engage in the traditional academic process after having spent time on their cushions.

By the third and fourth day, we also began to notice some students' emotional reactions to contemplative practice. Although the academic content of the course was about Buddhism and Christianity, their similarities and differences, their places of convergence and divergence, particularly with reference to contemplative practice, when the students sat on their cushions, the academic agenda receded and their own personal "stuff" began to emerge. We began to sense edginess among some of them during our classroom conversations. One student, a former member of the military, objected to the strict formality of Zen ritual, indicating that she felt at times as though she were back in boot camp. She perceived Wakoh as a "drill sergeant" because Wakoh paid exacting attention to the precision of students' ritual gestures during *zendo* pracatice. She asked, somewhat plaintively, "Where is the peace and joy?," intimating that the tension beginning to erupt meant there was something wrong with what we were doing. But this *is* the pedagogical method of Zen monastic training. At this point, we instructors knew

that the spiritual practices were beginning to take effect, and were doing precisely what they are intended to do: force practitioners to confront themselves and begin the process of getting out of their own way.

The theological diversity of this group of students guaranteed that they would react variously to the experience of "practicing" another religious tradition, and that during the academic portion of the course there would be little agreement on the issues under discussion. The more conservative Christian students had difficulty engaging in Buddhist practices, and one admitted that she had to "Christianize" *zazen* by saying a Christian phrase to herself as she inhaled and exhaled. Wakoh encouraged her to refrain from adding Christian elements to Zen practice, and try to experience *zazen* on its own terms. If one adds the name of Jesus to *zazen*, it ceases to be *zazen*; it is more like Centering Prayer, which is a different kind of practice.

Another student became incensed when Wakoh said that she, like some of the authors in our course texts (as well as many other non-Christians *and* Christians, including several in that classroom), rejects the Christian doctrine of Substitutionary Atonement. Aside from the Zen insistence that one cannot be "saved" vicariously from the sufferings of *samsāra*, but must experience liberation directly, Wakoh said she finds the idea that a loving God would require anyone to be tortured to death as payment for human sinfulness "repugnant." The student objected to her use of this word during class, prompting Wakoh to apologize. But the offended student continued expressing objections to classmates outside of class, in postings to the class discussion blog, to the dean of the seminary, and in the final paper, which Wakoh recused herself from grading. Although Wakoh holds two graduate degrees from a Christian seminary, and has long been active in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, the student interpreted Wakoh's remark as reflecting "hatred" of Christianity, rather than disagreement with one particular

theological interpretation of the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Such reactions are among the perils of interreligious dialogue and education.

On the other hand, the Unitarian Universalist and unaffiliated students entered into Zen practice with gusto, articulating their conviction that "we are all the same and our meditative practices are really all the same," and not understanding why other students would have difficulty doing Zen practice as Wakoh had presented it. This was one of the greatest pedagogical challenges the instructors faced. While it is natural, in the early stages of encounter and dialogue with a religious "other," to try to understand that "other" in terms that are familiar to oneself, and to look for common ground, it is equally important to recognize the *differences* in practice and worldview. One of our students, Deborah Sprague, reflects on the course in another essay in this volume, and recalls Wakoh writing on the blackboard, "Nirvana is not the Kingdom of Heaven." Nor is Buddhism a "path to God," or meditation equivalent to discursive prayer, as both instructors reminded students often.

In this course, the challenge was two-fold: to encourage students to examine and critique the theological and philosophical differences between Christianity and Buddhism, which was the cultural/linguistic part of the educational experience; and also to try to experience the practical differences between Buddhist prayer and meditation and Christian prayer and meditation. (We also chanted sutras, engaged in merit-transfer, and did *kinhin*, a form of walking meditation.) Students learned to understand Buddhism by engaging in these forms of Buddhist orthopraxy. In addition, students learned some new things about the tradition they thought they already knew so well, as they engaged Christian contemplative practices that were unfamiliar. For Protestants who tend to be very oriented toward

intellectualizing religious experience and faith, this sojourn into contemplative practice opened them to new ways of knowing and understanding their own traditions.

Participatory Epistemology in Contemplative Education

Contemplative pedagogies are becoming increasingly popular in higher education, and in disciplines far removed from the study of religions. When the academic discipline of religious studies first began to differentiate itself from theological studies, religious-studies scholars distanced themselves from theologians by promoting purportedly neutral, "outsider" perspectives. With the rise of feminist, queer, and post-colonial theories and epistemologies, however, scholars in religious studies have come to recognize that there is no"view from nowhere"; we are all situated somewhere, historically, culturally, and socially, and our position affects the assumptions we bring to any object of study, and the very questions we ask about it. Although teachers in the academic discipline of comparative religious studies do aim to teach "about" religions, rather than to inculcate particular religious beliefs, attitudes, or disciplines, and therefore adopt a pluralistic stance toward competing religious truth claims, we also each stand somewhere, and we recognize the critical need for empathy in understanding worldviews other than our own. The hegemony of cultural/linguistic epistemologies in religious studies is being challenged by those who believe that to truly learn about a religion requires some willingness to engage in the practices of that religion, so as to apprehend truths or insights that are simply unavailable through cognitive, intellectual, cultural/linguistic means. So it is becoming more acceptable to teach and learn about religions in ways that include participation in religious practices and rituals. Scholars describe this as the "participatory turn" in religious studies and education.

John Maraldo, writing about the benefits of contemplative pedagogies, observes, "Practice not only enhances but also transforms understanding in the alternative sense. Engaging in practices may not only increase the amount of content understood; it can change the very way that one understands. One can learn anew, often tacitly, *how* to understand."[2] Ferrer and Sherman write:

> Contrary to the hegemonic claims of the linguistic paradigm, then, it is becoming increasingly plausible that epistemological frameworks that take into account a wider — and perhaps deeper — engagement with human faculties (not only discursive reason but also intuition, imagination, somatic knowing, empathic discernment, moral awareness, aesthetic sensibility, meditation, and contemplation) may be critical in the assessment of many religious knowledge claims.[3]

In teaching comparatively about Buddhist and Christian contemplative traditions, it simply is not sufficient merely to engage in academic study of doctrines, myths, ethics, rituals, objects, and texts, given the centrality of practice in both traditions.We did ask students to apprehend and critique both religious traditions intellectually, but also to experience the teachings of the two religious traditions directly, drawing upon their bodily sensations and their imaginations as they journeyed back and forth between Christian and Buddhist contemplative methods.

> Clearly, one of the central issues at stake here is whether some kind of personal engagement or even transformation — such as the overcoming of mental pride, the integration of body and mind, the purification of the heart, or the development of contemplative competencies — may be required for both the apprehension and the assessment of certain religious truth claims. After all, most contemplative traditions hold that, in order to ascertain their most fundamental truths, practitioners need to develop cognitive competences beyond the structures of linguistic rationality. This question is, of course, at the heart of the conflict between religion and science — with adherents to the former worldviews claiming such need and proponents of the latter vigorously rejecting it.…[4]

> [T]he participatory turn argues for an *enactive* understanding of the sacred, seeking to approach religious phenomena, experiences, and insights as co-

> created events. Such events can engage the entire range of human epistemic faculties (e.g. rational, imaginal, somatic, aesthetic, and so forth) with the creative unfolding of reality or the mystery in the enactment — or "bringing forth" — of ontologically rich religious worlds.… In this spirit, we propose that a deeper and broader study of religion can emerge from the integration of our Romantic hearts (intuition, feeling, imagination), Enlightened minds (reason and critical inquiry), sensuous bodies (somatic and erotic knowing), and contemplative consciousness (mystical knowing.)[5]

When a student engages in a religious practice for only a short time, however, some would argue that the ways of knowing the practice affords may not be available to that student, because the practice needs to be undertaken over a long period of time to have the desired effects. Certainly, meditation is a discipline that needs to be practiced consistently and over weeks or months to achieve or reach the significant outcomes that practitioners of meditation expect to experience. However, just as one comes to realize that one cannot become a virtuoso musician by trying to blow a trumpet every day for two weeks, one certainly *can* comprehend in a more visceral way the challenges and rewards of playing that musical instrument, and its unique sounds and tonalities, if one has actually tried to do it, even over a two-week period. The same may be said for engaging in the kinds of meditative and prayer practices that were integral to this course.

Evaluation and other ethical issues in contemplative pedagogies

In the emerging field of contemplative studies and contemplative pedagogy, one issue that frequently arises is the qualifications of instructors who lead such practices. Given that spiritual practices are designed to form the practitioners within particular religious traditions, and usually are intended to help individuals' interior growth, it is likely that when students engage in such practices, they will experience things of a spiritual, emotional, and/or psychological nature that the average academic professor may or may not be trained to handle.

Judith Simmer-Brown has written about this issue, reporting that at her school, Naropa University, the hiring process for instructors who will lead contemplative practices involves careful assessment of their training. "Eclectic training may signal lack of depth or clarity in experience, and self-made meditation teachers are deemed untrustworthy. Has this person been authorized by her lineage teacher to teach the practice she wishes to introduce?"[6] In our case, the dean of CRCDS knows both of us well, and we are each ordained within our respective traditions. Denise is an Episcopal priest with fifteen years of parochial experience, including training in Spiritual Direction. Wakoh is a Sōtō Zen priest, with training in pastoral care and chaplaincy. Both of us were experienced in and comfortable with leading students in the contemplative practices we taught, and in dealing with the pastoral side-effects of that practice. That is particularly important where, as here, a significant portion of classroom time was spent in those practices. Indeed, this course functioned both as an academic course and a spiritual retreat over two weeks. In planning and offering such courses, instructors may want to consider whether some kind of pre-screening of students is necessary, to identify students for whom contemplative practices might not be advisable because of emotional or psychological issues with which they might be dealing at that particular point in their lives.

In this course, students were graded on the basis of three reflective papers, one on each of the three books we assigned. In these papers, students were asked to respond to what the authors said, in light of their own experiences of contemplative practice and classroom discussions. We gave them time each morning to do some journaling after the contemplative exercises, so they would have a record of their own reactions to these experiences, which could then inform their reflections in the academic papers. In the papers, we looked for critical thinking and an ability to integrate their personal experiences with the academic reading and

class discussions. We expected students to engage the assigned books with intellectual rigor and graduate-level analysis. Although participation in the contemplative practices was a required part of the course, and did affect the final grade, assessment was not on based upon *what* students experienced during those practices or how they described their experiences, but upon whether they participated, and how well they demonstrated their abilities to integrate personal experiences with the intellectual content of the course. We also permitted students to "opt out" of meditation on one or two occasions when they felt physically or emotionally unable to tolerate it.[7]

The distinction in religious studies between teaching "about religion" and "teaching religion" is less of an issue in a seminary classroom, given that seminary students are typically preparing to become religious leaders and expect that they will be taught about Christianity from within that tradition. So engaging in the Christian contemplative practices in the seminary classroom, while unusual, was not particularly threatening to the students or potentially inappropriate. However, the question whether it is appropriate to require Christian students to engage in religious or spiritual practices of a tradition other than their own does raise some issues, both pedagogical and dialogical. In the emerging field of interreligious studies and dialogue, it is commonly accepted that dialogue partners will engage in *observation* of one another's religious practices, rather than actually engaging in the practices of the dialogue partners. This interreligious etiquette recognizes that for many people who practice within particular religious traditions, it would be inappropriate to participate in the practices of a different religious tradition, either because their own traditions prohibit such activity, or because they would experience some theological or ideological conflicts in so doing. Moreover, in many cases it is impossible truly to participate in the rituals of another religious

tradition because of language barriers or clashing belief systems. In a seminary curriculum, some would argue that it is appropriate *only* to teach about other religious traditions, not to require students to engage in the practices of those other religions.

This is changing, however. As John Copenhaver has written, "These experiential exercises have the capacity to breathe life into religious studies and expose the beating heart of faith. Slowing students down, quieting them, does not force religious experience on them, but creates the conditions where the apprehension of something 'more' can occur."[8] Others argue that when engaging in interreligious education, an interreligious hermeneutic is necessary, and boundary-crossing between the religions being studied is not merely acceptable, it is indeed necessary. John Maraldo writes,

> [C]oming to understand the religion[s] of others by engaging in their practices does not eliminate the differences [among] them. It may call for a temporary disengagement with one's religious beliefs, but it does not require that one abandon them. It dissolves barriers, not differences, and this is one reason the alternative can still be considered a form of *understanding*.… Insofar as religions include non-textual practices, understanding religions requires an approach quite different from the kind of understanding usually conceived in hermeneutics.… If interreligious hermeneutics is to account for the full range of religious life, it must articulate an alternative notion of understanding that gives access to religious practices as they are lived.[9]

In preparing to teach this course, we gave considerable thought to this issue. Denise believes that Buddhism, unlike many other world religions, provides the least potential for a clash of belief systems among Christian seminarians, because it is so fundamentally based in practices, and its non-theistic approach leaves room for Christian students to engage in these without "betraying" their particular beliefs about God or Jesus or the Trinity. Wakoh believes that the fundamental Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* and Buddhist non-theism do conflict with religious theism and with Christian ideas about the "eternal soul," but Buddhism also regards

"attachment to views" as a cause of suffering, and Buddhist doctrines themselves may be seen as "rafts" that can be relinquished when the "other shore" of realization is reached.[1]

Dōgen, the founder of Sōtō Zen, insisted that Zen practice is not instrumental; it is not a *means* to awakening; it *is* awakening. The only way to understand this fully is to do Zen practice. Wholehearted, body-mind engagement in the ritual gestures of Zen is how one comes to realize, then gradually actualize or embody, the realization that all phenomena are impermanent (*anitya*); that all co-arise interdependently in an infinite web of karmic causality (*pratitya samutpada*), that the "self" is simultaneously distinct *and* inseparable from all "others," and that suffering arises from our own grasping, aversion, and ignorance about "the way things are." We ourselves, together with all beings, *are* the functioning of *anitya*, *pratitya samutpada*, and karma. Ultimately, we instructors decided that the pedagogical value of having students experience Zen through its practice was the only appropriate way to "teach about" it in a meaningful way. So the course was advertised in such a way that students knew before it began that they would be required to engage in Buddhist practices. Because the course was an elective, anyone who enrolled in it had consented explicitly to this particular form of pedagogy.

Reciprocity: some Buddhist perspectives

From Wakoh's perspective, the class posed several pedagogical problems related to reciprocity. First, she was the only "live" Buddhist involved in this particular Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Buddhists rarely enroll as students in Christian seminaries (even if they are seeking certification for careers such as chaplaincy), and very few Buddhist seminaries exist, so the lopsidedness of the dialogue is inevitable in a seminary context like the one in which the course occurred. Although one of her academic specialties is Buddhism, and she is familiar

with the range and diversity of Buddhist traditions, she can nevertheless offer only a limited perspective, given her focus on American Zen, as both a scholar and a practitioner. Although our students read many essays by scholars who practice other forms of Buddhism, the majority of those authors are, like Wakoh, converts to meditation-oriented traditions, which skews the portrayal of Buddhism in particular directions. As Denise learned from a trip to Southeast Asia, Buddhism looks very different "on the ground" in, say, Thailand, than it did from the vantage points of our makeshift *zendo*, seminary classroom, and textbooks.

Wakoh is also a Buddhist of rather unusual stripe. Raised in a mainline Protestant denomination by religiously broad-minded parents, she became active in a fundamentalist, Pentecostal church as a teenager, and was formally shunned by it after challenging its biblical literalism. She began practicing Buddhism in college and had been doing so for almost fifteen years by the time she decided to begin graduate studies in religion. She spent the first six years of her graduate education in an ecumenical Protestant seminary. Her seminary belongs to a theological consortium that includes the Institute of Buddhist Studies, a Jōdō Shinshū seminary, which offers courses on Zen, as well as a Unitarian Universalist seminary. Wakoh completed an MA in Buddhist and Christian studies, writing a thesis comparing Protestant and Zen clergy formation, and also completed a standard Christian MDiv curriculum including Clinical Pastoral Education. She was ordained as a Zen priest just before she began a PhD program in another predominantly Christian institution. She therefore describes herself as a Buddhist who is "fluent in Christian." This background makes her well suited to engage in Buddhist-Christian dialogue with Christian seminarians, but also highly unusual. She is unlike Buddhists who were raised as Buddhists, in Asia or elsewhere, and because she was educated in a Christian seminary, she is also unlike most Euro-American converts to Buddhism.

Her particular background makes Wakoh willing to engage in Christian contemplative practices in ways that other Buddhists might not be, given the theological content of those focusing on Jesus and God. She found the Ignation exercise of imaginatively entering the Gospel story about blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-51a) particularly moving. As she pictured herself in the roles of the blind man, the people telling him to be quiet as he called for help, and Jesus, compassion for these various characters arose. She had been clinging to irritation toward someone who had suggested recently that the poor are poor simply because they make bad choices, and this exercise helped Wakoh's heart soften toward that person, much as Buddhist *metta* practices can do. She also particularly enjoyed the repetitive prayers of the Rosary, and the musical Taizé chanting, a pleasant change from monotonal Zen recitation of sutras. In seminary, she had attended a Taizé service weekly. She is quite comfortable contemplating Jesus, but not all non-Christians are.

As Rita Gross observes in her Introduction to the volume *Buddhists Talk about Jesus, Christians Talk about the Buddha*, Christians "claim that Jesus is the incarnation of a deity who creates and redeems the world and such claims run counter to essential Buddhist ideas about how the world works."[10] Describing the essays contained in the book, Gross writes,

> without exception, the Buddhists had difficulties with Christian claims about Jesus though all expressed admiration for the human being that they saw in the records about him, particularly the gospels. The most often expressed difficulty stems from the frequent Christian claims concerning Jesus' uniqueness or his universal relevance to all humans. José Cabezón suggests that Buddhists do not have problems with the claim that Jesus is a manifestation of a deity, but with the claim that he is the only such manifestation.… Bokin Kim repeatedly suggests that she can respect Jesus as *a* way, but not as *the* way.[11]

Furthermore, Gross says, because of the history of Christian proselytizing, Buddhists may feel less safe experimenting with Christian practices than Christians feel when experimenting with Buddhist practices, because Buddhists do not generally pressure people to

convert to Buddhism.[12] The very fact that Christianity is the dominant religion in American culture means that Christians are in a privileged position. Members of non-dominant religions cannot avoid having to deal with Christianity in various ways, and might not feel so inclined to seek out further encounters with it, while Christians have the luxury of choosing whether to learn about religious "others."

Although Christians can learn from the experience of Buddhist meditation without necessarily having to compromise their beliefs about Jesus and God, anyone who has rejected a theistic tradition because of painful experiences with it might feel uncomfortable doing theistic contemplative practices. Gross got involved in Buddhist-Christian dialogue as a "deliberate attempt to heal the wounds inflicted on me by an exclusivist and doctrinaire version of Christianity."[13] Wakoh spent many years becoming comfortable again with Christian rituals, after her own wounding at the hands of Christian fundamentalists. Despite that healing, she still finds the theistic and sometimes triumphalist language of certain Christian prayers and liturgies troubling.

But even Buddhists who were not wounded by traumatic encounters with Christianity might not find Christian contemplative practices appealing, because of their theological contents. Grace Burford, for example, writes that she loved the church community in which she was raised, but could never believe the creeds she learned to recite, and abandoned Christianity in her teens, without rancor. She turned first to science and later to Buddhism. "I honestly do not expect my predominantly Buddhist worldview to be enriched by learning more about Christianity," she writes. [14] But she engages in Buddhist-Christian dialogue in order to understand people whose beliefs she cannot share — a goal she has in common with her Christian compatriots.

For all these reasons, a course like *Deepening the Heart of Wisdom* is likely to contain far more Christians than Buddhists. But Buddhists could benefit from it as well. The sad truth is that many Buddhists who have had bad experiences with Christianity have not had opportunities to experience other forms of Christianity that are far more welcoming and intellectually palatable than the versions they rejected. Courses like this, as well as the work of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, do offer such opportunities. Two months after this course, Wakoh also led a day-long retreat at a Buddhist monastery called "It's All About Love: What Buddhists and Christians Have in Common." It drew both Christians and Buddhists, who participated in Buddhist and Christian contemplative chanting, prayed with *malas* (Buddhist prayer beads), practiced *lectio divina* with passages from Buddhist and Christian texts, and contemplated sacred images. Several Buddhist participants said it helped them to appreciate Christianity more. So even in situations where the dialogue is uneven, or where a participant in interreligious dialogue feels discomfort with some of the practices of the dialogue partner, or with beliefs related to those practices, this kind of interreligious praxis can yield spiritual fruit on both sides, as the scholar-practitioners of the Society have demonstrated for many years.

Rita Gross writes,

> Having spent my entire career happily involved in cross-cultural studies of religion and many rewarding years engaged in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, I am well aware of how much there is to be gained by using the "comparative mirror." In fact, I would argue that everyone who uses the comparative mirror becomes a better scholar and a better theologian, and that "to know one religion is, indeed, to know none," as Max Müller, the founder of comparative studies in religion, argued so long ago.[15]

Pigeons, cats, and comparative theology

Denise is somewhat unusual among Christians as well, in that she has been active in interfaith dialogue for more than a decade. She has written curricula for Christians in the

principles and practices of interfaith dialogue, and has guided Christian laity in embarking on interreligious exploration. As an Episcopal priest she regularly celebrates the Eucharist and preaches in an Episcopal church, but she is nonetheless comfortable praying in a mosque, synagogue, Hindu temple, or Sikh *gurdwara*, or sitting *zazen* in a *zendo*. While some Christians find participation in the rituals of other religious traditions to be threatening, Denise finds that studying the beliefs and practices of other world religious traditions, and participating in some of these practices, enhances and deepens her understanding of and commitment to her own particular Anglican Christian tradition. She believes that this is an important aspect of teaching interreligious courses, whether they be in a graduate seminary program or in a secular, undergraduate setting. As Joseph O'Leary observes,

> Throwing a Buddhist cat among the Christian pigeons, or vice versa, we set up a hybrid way of thinking, aiming not at synthesizing the two traditions in their historical identity but at finding new religious or spiritual bearings for today.… Skillful means … sets up a dialectic in which our own horizon or identity is as much at stake as that of any of the dialogue partners.… It is a step toward more integrated vision, toward the recovery of a sane perspective on the religious history of humanity. Interreligious theology is hardly worth pursuing at all unless it brings about some such sea change in our understanding of our own religious tradition and of religion in general.[16]

Although we had only one Buddhist pigeon among the Christian cats, we nonetheless created a space for boundary-crossing and provided a way for Christian students to enact the theological exercise of passing back and forth between two religious traditions. Both students and professors engaged in a dialectic that put each person's religious commitments and identity at stake, and created the possibility of moving toward a more integrated vision of both traditions. The students who chose this course did so willingly, presumably because they were willing to take the risks that such an encounter might pose to their own understandings of their particular traditions.

In the discipline known as Comparative Theology, much is written about the importance of diving deeply into another tradition's writings and belief systems in order to better understand one's own. Francis X. Clooney, a Roman Catholic theologian, has written extensively on the practice of comparative theology as an academic discipline.

> Comparative theology is a manner of learning that takes seriously diversity and tradition, openness and truth, allowing neither to decide the meaning of our religious situation without recourse to the other. Countering a cultural tendency to retreat into private spirituality or a defensive assertion of truth, this comparative theology is hopeful about the value of learning. Indeed the theological confidence that we can respect diversity and tradition, that we can study traditions in their particularity and receive truth in this way, in order to know God better, is at the core of comparative theology.[17]

To be sure, "getting to know God better" is something Christians are concerned about when they embark on comparative theology, but taking comparative theology out of the realm of academic study and into the meditation room enables a Christian to come to know God better, while enabling a Buddhist to come to know practice differently and to understand Christians more fully than is possible simply from reading theology. Further, it can offer Buddhists the opportunity to appreciate the diversity within Christian tradition and the many places where Christian contemplative wisdom resonates with that of Buddhist contemplative traditions. To this point, Clooney explains the benefits of comparative theology:

> [C]omparative theology is a reflective and contemplative endeavor by which we see the other in light of our own, and our own in light of the other.… The comparative theologian must do more than listen to others explain their faith; she must be willing to study their traditions deeply alongside her own, taking both to heart. In the process, she will begin to theologize as it were from both sides of the table, reflecting personally on old and new truths in an interior dialogue…. Comparative theology is not primarily about which religion is the true one, but about learning across religious borders in a way that discloses the truth of my faith, in the light of their faith. [18]

Our course offered students the opportunity to engage in practical comparative theology through the experiential means of shared contemplative practices. It required engagement of the senses, the body, the spirit, and the intellect, as students both experienced contemplative practices and then engaged in academic analysis and critique of those practices and the traditions from which they come. The intent of this course was to enable students to engage in the process Paul Knitter describes as "*passing over* to another religious tradition in as open, as careful, and as personal a way as possible, and then *passing back* to one's own religion to see how walking in someone else's 'religious moccasins' can help one to understand and fit into one's own."[19] For the most part, the experience proved to do just that.

The comments in student course evaluations revealed that this comparative, participatory, contemplative, interreligious journey deepened students' experience and understanding of their own Christian traditions, even as it taught them in various dimensions, about Buddhism. Overwhelmingly, students reported that the course was an invaluable part of their seminary experience and helpful in their own spiritual formation. One student called it "life-changing," and another said, "This course has been so valuable to my formation as a Christian and as a citizen of the world."[20] They encouraged the seminary's dean to make more such offerings available in the CRCDS curriculum. Several also asked the seminary to offer additional courses in religions other than Christianity. In two short weeks, these students came to understand in a visceral way how critical is the wisdom of other world religions to their own formation as Christians, and to their understanding of their own religious tradition. By embodying a bit of Zen training, they were also able to relinquish some of the preconceptions they had brought to the religious "other" of Buddhism, and came to appreciate some of its nuances. This made "the strange familiar the familiar strange," as anthropologists say. The

contemplative pedagogy employed in the course was critical to that enhanced, experiential learning. As one student noted, "This course is aptly named: Deepening the Heart of Wisdom."[21]

Endnotes

[1] Terry Muck and Rita M. Gross, eds., *Buddhists Talk about Jesus, Christians Talk about the Buddha* (New York: Continuum, 2000); Terry Muck and Rita M. Gross, eds., *Christians Talk about Buddhist Meditation, Buddhists Talk about Christian Prayer* (New York: Continuum, 2003); Rita M. Gross and Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet: A Buddhist-Christian Conversation* (New York: Continuum, 2001). We chose these books because they included both Buddhist and Christian voices, but their similar formats began to feel a bit repetitive. In a future iteration of the course, we would consider using other texts, for example one written from a perspective of "dual belonging," such as Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Oneworld, 2009, paperback 2013), or Jan Willis, *Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist, and Buddhist — One Woman's Spiritual Journey* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008). Another option would be a book on Christian contemplation written by a Christian, for Christians and a book on Buddhist meditation by a Buddhist for Buddhists.

[2] John C. Maraldo**,** "A Call for an Alternative Notion of Understanding in Interreligious Hermeneutics", in *Interreligious Hermeneutics,* Cornille, Catherine and Christopher Conway, eds., (Cascade Books: Eugene, OR, 2010), 114.

[3] Jorge N.Ferrer and Jacob H. Sherman, "Introduction", in *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies,* Ferrer, Jorge N. and Jacob H. Sherman, eds., (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 11.

[4] Ferrer and Sherman, ibid., 26.

[5] ibid., 35, 40.

[6] Judith Simmer-Brown, "Training the Heart Responsibly," in *Meditation in the Classroom,* Simmer-Brown, Judith and Fran Grace, eds., (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), p. 112.

[7] Several other contributors to this volume reflect on ethical issues raised by the use of contemplative pedagogies in academic classrooms. Two other thoughtful reflection on this topic are Sid Brown, "Invitation and Coercion in Contemplative Pedagogy" and Judith Simmer-Brown, Training the Heart Responsibly: Ethical Considerations in Contemplative Teaching," both in Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace, eds., *Meditation and the Classroom,* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011). Sid Brown is also the author of *A Buddhist in the Classroom* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), a reflection on academic teaching informed by Buddhist practices.

[8] John D. Copenhaver, "Two Contemplative Practices that Animate the Practice of Religion," in Simmer-Brown and Grace, eds., *Meditation and the Classroom,* ibid., 218.

[9] Maraldo**,** "A Call for an Alternative Notion of Understanding in Interreligious Hermeneutics," ibid., 115.

[10] Muck and Gross, *Buddhists Talk about Jesus*, ibid., 12.

[11] ibid., 8-9.

[12] ibid., 12.

[13] Rita Gross, "Meditating on Jesus," in Muck and Gross, *Buddhists Talk about Jesus*, ibid., 32.

[14] Grace Burford, "If the Buddha Is So Great, Why Are These People Christians?" in Muck and Gross, *Buddhists Talk about Jesus*, ibid., 132.

[15] Rita Gross, *Feminism & Religion: An Introduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 245, citing William E. Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 38, 164.

[16] Joseph S. O'Leary, "Skillful Means as a Hermeneutic Concept," *Interreligious Hermeneutics,* ibid., 166-167.

[17] Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders,* (Wiley-Blackwell Publishers: West Sussex, England, 2010), 8-9

[18] ibid., 11, 13, 16.

[19] Knitter, Paul, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian,* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 2.

[20] Student evaluations from "Deepening the Heart of Wisdom" course, January 2012.

[21] ibid.