

Heeding the calls to solitude and solidarity

Thomas C. Fox | Jun. 24, 2009

Authors uncover the intersections of Eastern and Western spirituality

East & West

SOLITUDE AND COMPASSION: THE PATH TO THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

By Gus Gordon

Published by Orbis Books, \$18

Exhaling, I step out the door into our backyard, trying to be mindful, which, of course, means I'm not yet effortless, and not where I want to be, but it's a starting point. Almost all the Eastern gurus with whom I'm familiar connect proper breathing with thought, or, rather, lack of it.

I inhale, consciously taking a slow, deep breath. As I do, I recall being impressed once with the thought that Jesus breathed this same planetary air. Centuries later, could we still somehow be sharing life-giving molecules?

It's late May. Our gardens are as lush and fresh as they will be. My eyes are drawn by swaths of green spotted with a rich assortment of pinks, whites, reds and violets, all blossoming flowers. A sense of peace and gratitude well up within as I sit down, the products of my wife's passion and labors before me.

It's early morning; dawn is more than an hour distant. The dull morning light adds a layer of tranquility. The birds are already chirping, fluttering about, dancing from bush to feeder. Before me is the white marble Buddha we brought back with us from a trip to Vietnam.



This Buddha is all about quiet composure, hands and legs crossed, eyelids closed. Day after day, regardless of what emotion or state of mind I bring to this place, to this statue, Buddha's composure never changes.

It does not take long to enter early meditation on a day like this. I think again of my breathing. It becomes my unspoken mantra on this morning. Meditation deepens, thoughts wander in and out. It seems there are infinite opportunities to return to prayerful/mind state, to return to God. Ours is a God of infinite patience. I hold the thought. Let it pass.

Catholicism is very much my home, so much so that I feel totally free to explore the Spirit anywhere and at any time and in any religious tradition. The statues in our backyard reflect our eclectic religious tastes. Buddha is not the only figure in our gardens. Two Virgin Mary statues anchor corner grottos. St. Francis, the bird on his shoulder long broken off after the statue tipped over some years back, stands at the base of a 60-foot oak tree. Across a patch of grass stands a statue of Quan Am (in Chinese, Quan Yin), a life-giving water vessel in her right hand. She is the most widely recognized Buddhist female deity/saint. And then there is the Tibetan fertility goddess. My wife found her at a garage sale one day and brought her home.

Legend has it that Quan Am was married to a rich man who had a mole on his face with a hair growing out from it. Thinking this to be ugly, one night, while he slept, Quan Am took scissors and was going to trim the hair. However, her husband suddenly awoke, and, seeing Quan Am standing above him with a scissors, thought that she was trying to murder him. Thereupon, her husband and his family put her out of the house. Alone and poor, Quan Am dressed as a man and went to the Buddhist pagoda where she worked and prayed for the rest of her days, setting such an example that she became a Buddhist saint.

I find that the more I meditate, ideally for more than 15 minutes at a time, the easier it becomes, or rather the more likely I can control what some Buddhists call "monkey mind." We know it well. It's that state of consciousness that keeps us awake at night. It's that weariness that comes from cluttered thoughts. It's that seeming inability to control or direct consciousness. It's that place most of us live in most of the time -- whether we know it or not. Escaping that state is what meditation is all about. So meditation, as I see it, is about escaping outwardness into inwardness into nothingness into everythingness. It can happen anywhere and at any time. Gardens are not necessary, though they are helpful as nature is one grand invitation to reflection and prayer. Consider these words:

When you become accustomed to solitude and the world of nature, when you begin to relish the silence of the woods, the birds, the animals, the starry sky, when you cherish the simple warmth of loving relationships, you experience a gradual restoration of fundamental humanity. As a result you become increasingly sensitive to what is fake, vapid and vacuous.



Living, as we often do, in fragmented excess, our search for silence is quite

natural. The words above are not mine. They are taken from Gus Gordon's introduction in his new book, *Solitude and Compassion: The Path to the Heart of the Gospel*. Gordon, a priest in the St. Lucia diocese in the

West Indies, has for the past 30 years been living in a hermitage in Tennessee.

Solitude and Compassion is one of a new generation of East-West books that freely and easily feels at home in both traditions. Indeed, Gordon wants us to understand that calls to solitude and to solidarity are not contradictory as much as they are complementary. He argues that each is an authentic approach to self-discovery and the Divine. This is a delightfully helpful book to read, full of lessons from Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, with challenges that take us forward fearlessly. Gordon suggests a spirituality of subtraction, emphasizing voluntary poverty, simplicity, and the feeling that enough is enough. He also emphasizes a spirituality of addition, which embraces more and more of every aspect of life. Shelves are filled with books on comparative religions. What we are finding now, a half century into serious East-West cross-spiritual fertilization, are books like this on comparative spirituality.

Many Christians I know who have explored Eastern spirituality find themselves attracted to Buddhism, even while remaining wholly Christian. This is, in part, possible because Buddhism is not a religion as much as it is a spirit path. Many Christians, coming into contact with Buddhism for the first time, find it a kind of newly discovered sibling. I find Buddhism, as a spiritual path, shares with Christianity a core sense of paradox. Both traditions teach us to lose ourselves in order to find ourselves; we are to empty ourselves in order to fill ourselves. I find it remarkable that just as many Westerners are looking East discovering Eastern mind-expanding spiritual traditions, Easterners are looking West, adding heart-filling practices to their own spiritual journeys. Christianity and Buddhism, brother and sister on spiritual journeys, can be seen as opposites, but perhaps more appropriately as two sides of one human experience. Gordon does not miss the point. He writes:

If, in confrontation with the absolute mystery, the Buddhist's approach is more intellectual, seeking realization through insight/wisdom/gnosis, the Judeo-Christian approach is more affective, personal and communal, moving the will to compassion and the doing of justice.

If Buddhism talks about consciousness and the levels of consciousness, the Judeo-Christian tradition speaks of conscience and a change of heart.

Whereas for Buddhism wisdom is sought primarily through contemplative experience, for the Judeo-Christian tradition it emerges primarily through the experience of radical solidarity with our neighbor.

Gordon postulates that both paths encounter God. "Discovering God or recovering our enlightened state occurs both in solitude and solidarity. ... In trying to honor both these traditions, we could conclude that we discover God by both realizing the kingdom within and engaging in the kingdom without. Both the practice of meditation and that of embracing the suffering of others introduces us to the divine mystery." *Solitude and Compassion* is a meditation aimed at uniting the "going within" with the "going without" so that they reinforce one another.

Cross-pollination



SOCIALLY ENGAGED BUDDHISM

By Sallie B. King

Published by University of Hawaii Press, \$16

Socially Engaged Buddhism, authored by Sallie B. King, professor of philosophy and religion at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Va., is another manifestation of this cross-pollination. When people think of Buddhism, the struggle for social justice is not the first thought that springs to mind. But it is a notion that rests at the center of this book. King writes that the work of engagement, of justice-building, is a relatively new face of Buddhism, one that can be found from the forests of Thailand to Zen centers in California, from the Sri Lankan countryside to the streets of New York, and almost everywhere in between.?

This book is an introduction to a contemporary movement of Buddhists, East and West, who actively engage with the problems of the world on the basis of Buddhist ideas, values and spirituality. The author identifies the philosophical and ethical thinking behind the movement and examines how key principles such as karma, the Four Noble Truths, interdependence, nonharmfulness and nonjudgmentalism relate to social engagement. King points out that working to reduce suffering in humans, living things and the planet is integral to spiritual practice and leads to selflessness and compassion. *Socially Engaged Buddhism* is a sustained reflection on social action as a form of spirituality expressed in acts of compassion, grass-roots empowerment and nonviolence. This book is a Western book about Eastern traditions finding new lifelines of spirituality in the West.



JESUS AND THE LOTUS: THE MYSTICAL DOORWAY BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY

AND YOGIC SPIRITUALITY

By Russill Paul

Published by New World Library, \$14.95

Jesus in the Lotus represents another attempt to explore Eastern and Western spiritual paths and the richness that comes out of exploring more than one tradition. Russill Paul is a musician who once trained simultaneously as a monk and Yogi under the direction of mystic Benedictine Fr. Bede Griffiths. His time with Griffiths was foundational and catapulted his spiritual journey. Paul asserts that the exploration and integration of the philosophy of yoga need not threaten or take away from essential Christian beliefs, but rather adds a dimension to them, deepening one's faith.

In *Jesus in the Lotus*, Paul tells the story of how, after a motorcycle accident and subsequent crisis of faith, his life and heart opened to the teachings of Griffiths. Paul presents what he calls a "pathless path" that blends the wisdom of Christianity and the spiritual teachings of yoga for a holistic daily spiritual practice. Drawing on Christian scripture and Hindu philosophy, he explores the underbellies of the Christian and Hindu religions. By demonstrating that these two separate religions can actually unite in one person's spiritual practice at the core of life -- as they did for him -- he paints a path of religious tolerance and, as he states, personal liberation. This is an adventurous work of a very personal nature. The narrative, written simply, introduces the reader to a number of eastern spiritual ideas. Finally, the book provides resources for further exploration.

Decades from now, historians will look back upon this period of history as one filled with great danger and great hope. Knowledge seems to have run ahead of human wisdom. We've split the atom and have built arsenals of nuclear weapons; our global environments are endangered. To make it through this treacherous moment we will need all the spiritual energies we can harness and so it is comforting and a sign of hope that Eastern and Western spiritual paths are finding each other, learning from one another, and spawning new life.

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