



the empty bell

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# Sunanda Markus interviews Robert A. Jonas

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S: It seems that your spiritual practice spans quite a few different traditions. Do you have a name for your spiritual practice, and how would you describe it?

RJ: I am a Christian whose spiritual life and practice is informed by zazen and Buddhist teachings. As a Christian, I try to pray in the light of New Testament revelations about God, and in the tradition of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox mystics, beginning with the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the Middle East. I try to live with Christ as my guide. As a Buddhist, I practice a Japanese path called Sui-Zen (blowing Zen). Each day I play meditation pieces on a bamboo, end-blown flute called the shakuhachi.

S: Tell us something about your journey as a Christian, in particular.

RJ: I grew up in mid-Wisconsin, in a German-Lutheran family. When I was about 6 years old, my parents descended into alcoholism and divorce, so I spent a lot of time with my maternal grandparents. They spoke German around the house, went to a German speaking Lutheran church, and read their German Bible every day. My grandmother, Leona Radenz, taught me how to pray when I was a toddler. She was a complicated, uneducated German woman who had grown up on a farm. As she became older I think that she became quite paranoid, sometimes standing behind the living room curtains, watching and judging the neighbors. In the end, she alienated all her relatives. But, at the same time, Grandma had a heart of gold. I don't know how one puts all that together. She was a very wounded person, but she carried a grace, and she passed it on to me. Grandma taught me a German prayer that means "I am small, my heart is pure. No one lives in my heart but Jesus alone." And that was the beginning of my spiritual life.

For awhile, during the final stages of my parents' divorce, I was in serious trouble with the law. Once, after being arrested, a police officer told me that I was on a fast-track to prison. Fortunately, in high school, I fell in love with a granddaughter of the local Lutheran pastor, and I reclaimed the Jesus that I had met through my grandmother. In 1965, I received a scholarship to Luther College in Iowa, with a vision of becoming a Lutheran pastor myself. But then, the Vietnam War was heating up, and I decided that religion was irrelevant to the enormity of that conflict. I transferred to Dartmouth College and majored in Government, hoping to be a U.S. Senator.

After college, and after a year in VISTA as a community organizer in an African-American neighborhood of Kansas City, I moved to New Hampshire with my first wife and my daughter Christy. While managing an organic farm, I got to know the monks at a Carmelite monastery in Peterborough called The Common, and through them I first met the Spanish, 16th century mystic, St. John of the Cross. Lutheranism had been a no-frills, practical spirituality. But now, as a Carmelite, I relished the contemplative depths of St. John and other Roman Catholic mystics. Soon, I converted to Roman Catholicism and became a Third-

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Order Carmelite, an order of lay people who commit themselves to periods of daily silence and prayer, and occasional retreats.

In the early 1980's I went through a divorce, and met my future wife, Margaret, who is an Episcopalian. That meeting, together with my growing dissatisfaction with the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy, marked the beginning of an Episcopal turn in my Sunday liturgical life. Soon, after Margaret and I were married in 1986, she was ordained an Episcopal priest. Meanwhile, after finishing a doctorate at Harvard in education and psychology, I enrolled as an M.T.S. student (Master of Theological Studies) at the Jesuit Weston School of Theology, where I studied the history of Christian contemplative spirituality, and its relationship with contemporary psychology.

In the early 1980's I also met a Catholic priest, writer, and Harvard professor named Henri Nouwen, and we became good friends. Through him, I became acquainted with the L'Arche communities for handicapped people, and eventually a close friend and supporter of the L'Arche Daybreak community in Toronto. About six years ago, I began to accompany Henri and other members of the Daybreak community for lectures and fund-raising. In 1993, Henri helped me to inaugurate the Empty Bell Sanctuary in Watertown. It was a big loss for me and many others when Henri died of a heart attack on September 21, 1996.

S: And now, in your Christian life, do you attend the Episcopal church?

RJ: Well, that's a good question. I go to Episcopal Sunday services about once a month with Margaret, and I give sermons, or lead adult education gatherings in Episcopal settings almost as often. Since Margaret is a priest in that denomination, I have met some wonderful people there, and made some friends. About five years ago, the Reverend David Killian had an idea about starting an interfaith series at his All Saint's Episcopal Parish in Boston. He calls it RUAH (Hebrew for breath or spirit). I joined that effort as a member of the faculty, and an administrator. Over the years I have given talks and retreats through Ruah twice a year, focusing on topics like psychotherapeutic and spiritual healing, contemplative prayer, the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, St. John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, and the spirituality of grieving. In 1994, under the sponsorship of RUAH, I organized a Boston Parliament of World Religions weekend as a follow-up to the 1993 conference in Chicago. Recently, Margaret has joined the staff at All Saint's, as an Assistant Rector, so I may be spending more time there on Sundays.

S: But you are still, officially, Roman Catholic?

RJ: Yes, that's right. The truth is that I feel at home in just about any Christian church, of any denomination. I've been around the block, baptized Methodist, raised Lutheran, converted to Catholicism, attracted to Baptists, Quakers and Eastern Orthodox, and married to an

Episcopalian. I go to Catholic Masses or Lutheran services several times a year. And, one of my deepest experiences of holiness comes when I lead a monthly retreat for Unitarian-Universalist ministers. To me, these different traditions each bring out a different face of Christ.

I guess that I remain Roman Catholic because the mystics of that tradition most nearly describe my inner life of prayer. I still like the Catholic Mass, but unfortunately, I find most priests to be asleep at the wheel. And I often feel insulted by the hierarchy's obsessions about sex and morality in general. It often seems that the Roman hierarchy has lost touch with the beautiful, rich depths of its own contemplative tradition. Even many monasteries have lost touch with it. But there is something of a revival, through the work of people like Thomas Merton, Evelyn Underhill, Henri Nouwen, John Main, Rosemary Reuther, Thomas Keating, Richard Rohr, Jose Hobday, Bede Griffiths, David Steindl-Rast, and many others.

S: I want to hear more about how you integrate your Christian and Buddhist practices, but first, tell us something about your attraction to the East.

RJ: I remember reading about Buddha in my public high school library. But my first direct contact with the East came in my junior year at Dartmouth College in 1968. As an extra-curricular activity, I signed up for Korean karate, Tai Kwan Do. It turned out that my teacher, Don Miller, was also trained in Taoist meditation. So, before and after each class, we sat on our mats, crossed our legs, and meditated. We became attuned to the life energy or chi, in our bodies, and tried to let that chi express itself in our karate forms (Kata's) and competitions. I was immediately drawn to the spiritual power of these practices, though I did not wonder too much how they fit in with being a Christian. I think that either I held these two traditions separate in my mind, or I thought of Taoism as better than Christianity. I know that I was influenced by the writings of Alan Watts, a former Episcopal priest who dived deep into Zen.

In subsequent years, I taught Tai Kwan Do karate, including the meditation, in both rural and urban settings. Throughout the 1970's, after my Catholic conversion, I continued to practice Taoist meditation. Thomas Merton's work (*Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, *The Asian Journal*) helped me to think about the connections with Christian prayer. I read and re-read D. T. Suzuki's *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*.

Then, in 1983 my new friend Margaret gave me a birthday present, a certificate for a nine week course in Vipassana meditation with Larry Rosenberg. I loved it. For the next five years I practiced this Southeast Asian brand of Buddhist meditation, and went on many silent retreats at the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts. After that, I explored Zen meditation (zazen) with Zen Master George Bowman and others. In the last

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few years I have made many friends in the Tibetan Buddhist community, and have come to appreciate the beauty and power of its teachings.

S: And now, you say that you practice Sui-Zen. What is that?

RJ: Just about every day for the last five years, I have played the Japanese bamboo flute, the shakuhachi. In 1991, just as I was finishing my Master's degree in theology, I met a fellow student, a former Trappist monk named David Duncavage. He has a really interesting story. While in his novitiate at a monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, a Zen teacher visited David's community, and played the shakuhachi for them. David got hooked, and then traveled to Japan to learn more. After a time, he asked to be released from his vows, married a Japanese woman, and now has two lovely children. David ended up staying in Japan for many years, eventually becoming a master shakuhachi player and craftsman himself. When I heard David play, I knew immediately that this was the instrument that I had longed for all my life. Immediately, I started taking lessons with David. Over these last few years, my friendship with David, the shakuhachi itself, and the international shakuhachi community have become a rich, living, common ground for East-West dialogue.

I usually play the shakuhachi every morning. In a typical day, I begin my prayer time with a half-hour of shakuhachi. When I can manage it, I play for an hour or two. Historians believe that the bamboo flute came to Japan from China in the 7th century AD. That is about the same time that Buddhism arrived as an import from the Chinese Chan tradition. People say that Sui-Zen is rooted in Japanese Buddhism, but now there is evidence that the flute was played in China for many centuries as a Taoist practice. Perhaps it was called "blowing Chan", or "blowing chi," I don't know.

At one point in Japanese history, there was official government and cultural support for the Fuké sect which set up many monasteries devoted to this practice of musical Zen in the 17th and 18th centuries. Unfortunately, the Fuké sect fell out of favor with the government, and most of these monasteries were suppressed. Still, Sui-Zen existed, and even flourished, at the margins of the Japanese Buddhist community. Today, Sui-Zen is dying out in Japan, just as Buddhism in general has stagnated there. Buddhist teachers around the world, including Sui-Zen masters, see their spiritual frontiers in America and Europe, rather than in their home countries.

S: And what is the actual practice? What do you do?

RJ: Well, let me say first that there are many schools of shakuhachi music now, including folk, meditation, modern, jazz, classical, and so on. The musical tradition of meditation in which I am being trained is called honkyoku (origin music). Here, one's intention is not to play melodies, but rather to bring one's full awareness to each note, and the silence between



them. Each breath is important. Of course, in order to do this, one must let go of distractions in the mind. In bringing full attention to each note, one moves into the domain of The Origin, into Buddhist Emptiness, into the unknown that is at the heart of each note, each breath. In honkyoku, one doesn't play melodies that go somewhere. In a sense, one ends up where one starts, in this present moment.

S: And there is no melody?

RJ: That characterization may be too strong. Each piece does have a shape, and a distinctive character. Many pieces of honkyoku have been handed down through the centuries, passed on from monastery to monastery, master to master, sometimes with slight variations. There is a basic repertoire that one learns. I have learned to read Japanese musical notation. But honkyoku is also an oral tradition. Sometimes we play notes that aren't there in the score, or we ignore notations that are there. Many poetic nuances are passed on from teacher to student. So, in a way there is a deep melody that is being passed from generation to generation of students. It is a melody that transcends the music itself, and includes a way of experiencing reality, a way of living.

S: Maybe this is a good time to ask you about how you integrate Sui-Zen with your Christian life.

RJ: The integration happens on two levels. First, there is the actual experience of these spiritual practices, and second is how the mind makes sense of them. On the level of actual practice, I like to begin my meditation and prayer time with honkyoku. Simply put, blowing into this piece of bamboo concentrates my awareness, and brings me to this moment. Just this moment. The sensations of breathing, of sitting on this cushion, the sounds of the crows and cars outside, the ticking of the clock, and the flow of images and feelings in my body and mind. Honkyoku brings me into the present. The more present I become, the more I sense the presence of the Holy, of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. These are all names that I use for different aspects of the experience.

I have the experience of being not alone, as if there is a presence within my presence. There is a presence within me and around me that is beyond me, and beyond what is around me. That presence is something infinite, and infinitely loving, merciful, and beautiful. It is God as the Beloved who blesses me and calls me the Beloved. Sometimes I open my palms up like this, as if to say, here I am--just as I am. That sense of belovedness comes through a stream of spiritual tradition that is rooted in the Hebrew book, the Song of Songs. Generations of Jewish and Christian mystics have drunk from the well of the Song of Songs, seeing it as an allegory of God's courtship with the soul.

I have loved St. John of the Cross and other Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart (a

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14th century German, Dominican friar) because they bring together elements of the Christian mystical tradition that are also illuminated by Zen. For example, the more I sit in silence, the more I realize that I am not my thoughts. This is a revolutionary insight because most of us take it for granted that our thoughts are ours, or somehow constitute the self. In a way, we are taught to take our thoughts personally. For example, as a child, I learned to feel guilty about having “bad” thoughts, as if thought was something that I “did.” Both Christian and Buddhist meditation, founded on the principle of just sitting in silence and not doing anything, show us that thoughts seem to come and go in some impersonal way. We are bigger, deeper and more mysterious than our thoughts. In fact, each of us is a particular, infinite context for thinking.

So, a Zen-Christian practice begins there, in the silence, in simply being here now. Now, a mind can be doing all kinds of judgmental stuff, like “Am I doing this right?” or “Is he or she better than me?” or “I’m not far enough along,” or “I’m embarrassed, or irritated or hopeless or worrying.” Or whatever. The feelings and thoughts can continue to roll through, but my hands stay open, and I assume that somehow there’s an emptying in that. From a Christian perspective this opening and emptying is called kenosis, the self-emptying of Christ. Maybe we could also call it ego-emptying, because we are trying to let go the self-referential, greedy, and narcissistic part of ourselves, so that something bigger and more compassionate can come through. Some people say that as we let go of the small “s” self, a larger “S” Self emerges. In the Christian tradition, that larger Self is understood to be somehow identical with Christ.

So, out of the stillness of meditation comes the sense of Belovedness, which comes from God. As that Belovedness takes root in us, Jesus’s story, the story of Christ on earth, also takes root in our souls. The center of our identity begins to shift from fearful self-centeredness to loving other-centeredness.

S: And, of course, we ourselves are included in that otherness?

RJ: Yes, exactly. We can’t go out there loving others if we ourselves feel unworthy or unlovable. That won’t work. Somehow, we are included in the circle of love whose center is now not just within us, but everywhere. Then, when we get up off the cushion, and move into our daily lives, we move from a deeper center, and the love that we give is not just our own invention. We are passing something on that comes to us through grace.

S: This word grace is more of a Christian term, isn’t it?

RJ: Yes. It’s not exactly Zen. But don’t forget that there are many Buddhist traditions. Comparatively speaking, Zen is a small school within Japanese Buddhism. There are actually more Pure Land Buddhists in Japan than Zen Buddhists. And Pure Land folks also find grace at

the core of spiritual practice. My Tibetan Buddhist friends also understand its importance.

What we are saying in terms of meditation is that our own effort can only bring us so far. After that, we must let something happen. We trust that if we let go of ego control, something even more expansive and trustworthy will come through. That is grace at work.

S: I am not sure that I understand how you are using the word, “Christ.”

RJ: This is an important point. We Christians are sometimes not so clear about what we mean either. In general, we can say that Jesus was the historical person, the carpenter or peasant son of Mary and Joseph. We don’t know a lot about him in a biographical sense. But the term Christ is a spiritual name that points to the meeting of the divine and human in this person Jesus. In the contemplative and mystical traditions, we say that the divine did not just take on Jesus’s individual human life, but that in Jesus, the divine came fully into human nature itself. Which means that this meeting ground of humanity and divinity is in all of us, every human being, and actually in all of creation.

Christ is the self-emptying of God in us. That is who Christ is. So, when we pray like this, we say that we are giving ourselves to Christ, who is giving himself to God in us. We are saying, “You are my life.” The personal pronoun “I” then becomes a doorway to something much greater, to a larger sense of self. For example, Saint Paul said, “Not I, but Christ in me” (Galatians 2:20). This was a very profound statement because Paul is saying that his ego has been illuminated. The “I” who was there, is not there anymore. Of course, Paul wouldn’t say that now he had become Jesus, in some crazy way. He still says “in me,” as if there is still a conventional self that continues to exist, a historical person with a particular life-history. But there’s an illumination of that self that has certain characteristics that I think are true for anyone who has that experience. Now there is an indwelling of compassion, complete freedom, beauty, Belovedness, deep sensitivity, empathy, and goodness.

It is important to remember that in Jewish and Christian prayer, there is always a sense of “I-and-Thou,” always a sense of personhood and relationship. No matter how deep one goes in prayer, there is always at least a background of an immense, interpersonal love. And even though the experience is vast, it never gets abstract: there is always an “I” that is being loved, as long as we exist in a physical body. This emphasis places some ultimate value on the particular and the historical. Each particular person, and even each particular rock, tree, river and ocean, has ultimate value by virtue of its having been created in God. All of creation is infused with the presence of the loving God. God says that “in our image” we are created. This pronoun “our” in Hebrew scripture, in Genesis, is a plural. So, even though God is One, there is a sense of plurality in God. We are created in the image of God, and God circulates in our being.

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But then, of course, there is a fallenness that comes into us, where the ego wants to be in charge. Some Christians latch onto this fallenness, call it sin, and then attach to it as the center around which the whole spiritual life revolves. But that is not what the scriptures say. I think that this is a major mistake in Christian theology and preaching. First is the goodness.

S: I think that this is an important point. So many of us have experienced a Christianity that focuses on the negative, on sinfulness and judgment.

RJ: That's true. Personally, I don't spend a lot of time thinking about how bad I am, how sinful I am. In my prayer, and in my life with others, I spend much more time trying to take in God's essential goodness and love, or trying to let it in by giving up trying. The infinite love is just there to receive in abundance. Too many of us, myself included, have had low self-esteem to begin with. We need to hear about our essential goodness. And it turns out that this message is fundamental to Jewish and Christian spirituality. So it must become a practice, moment-to-moment, not just an intellectual thing. We have to actually experience it, right in the middle of our loneliness and our constant, silent self-talk. It must become an unspoken attunement in the common ground between heaven and earth within us.

So, for Christian, this means that you can't just go to church on Sundays and be done with it. The Christian life calls for a revolution of consciousness, a divinization of our lives. You can't, any longer, expect to be a Christian without practicing Christ's consciousness. Actually, we are not merely practicing this consciousness, but rather trying to become it.

In our popular spiritual culture, Christ consciousness has not been explored and explained as much as Buddha consciousness. But a few Catholic theologians such as Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan have gone into this. What they are saying is that there is something of God's awareness within our awareness. God is that close! And they are saying that this sacred awareness has an intrinsic, interpersonal and mystical dynamism. They use the symbol of the Trinity.

Now, I know that this notion is controversial, because it seems to hinge on whether or not one accepts Jesus as one's personal savior. I try to avoid that kind of language, and instead focus on the deeper, experiential truth that the doctrine points to. The Trinity is the image of God that is in us. I love Saint Augustine's (5th c.) characterization of the Trinity in an essay called *The Trinity*. He wrote it in Latin, and it's quite scholarly and philosophical, but there are some real gems of wisdom there. He says that the Trinity is the Lover, the Beloved, and the Love that flows between. If we become who we really are, that is, the image and likeness of God, then, dare I say it, we become the Trinity. Christian mystics have always held out this possibility, calling it Union, Sacred Marriage, and so on. In that dynamic state, the flow of love is infinite and unconditional--it just flows, like the Tao. Of course,

the ego is always waiting there, waiting to own, possess and become attached to anything pleasant, even spiritual experiences. It starts putting conditions on love: “I’ll love you if you do this, or become this, or get rid of that.” But the Unconditional in us--oh! those arms are as wide as the cosmos, and we’re all evolving in that direction if we can become still enough to let it in.

So, to come back to your question, when I blow into the shakuhachi, when I pray, and when I sit with people in spiritual guidance, the Trinity is my true north on the inner compass. It’s where we all come from and where we are going. This is not an abstract idea. It’s something in the body, something to be lived, right in the middle of pain, struggle, injustice, loneliness and suffering. The silence, concentration, and beauty of the shakuhachi, helps me to come into the territory of the Beloved. The shakuhachi helps me to let go of identifying with my thinking and my momentary emotions. True north is just enjoying the moment-to-moment gift of living and breathing, and that is God enjoying life through us.

S: It is being totally present, isn’t it?

RJ: Yes. God is the most present thing there is.

S: These insights must be useful in doing psychotherapy--aiming for true north, or being as present as you can, in order to hear another person accurately.

RJ: Yes. When we are more present we are also more available. Being present breaks through the veil of our narcissism, so that we can see what is actually happening outside of us, not just what our model of the person might dictate. We certainly hear more of what someone is saying, and we also hear deeper levels of what is there. In addition, being present and being available means being vulnerable. True presence is open-hearted, and includes a willingness to be deeply affected, and even changed by our relationships, even those in which we are officially the helper.

In terms of spiritual practice itself, complete presence does not equal complete self-knowledge. Always, there are hidden areas of the self, places that haven’t yet been revealed. We can never know everything there is to know about ourselves. But the intention to know as much as we can is still a worthy one.

So, what complete presence means is that I am as present as I can be.

