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Norman Fischer and Fr. Leo LeFebure: Discussion

Zoketsu Norman Fischer, Fr. Leo Lefebure

from **Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002**

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Norman Fischer: Leo, it was fun the other night. We snuck away and went to Louisville, and that was really great. I learned a lot about you, and I also learned a lot about many other things. I appreciate your breadth of knowledge and heart. It was great. I know from that evening that you have practiced Buddhist meditation. I've written a lot about Buddhism in relation to Christianity, so I wanted to ask you on a personal basis, in your own life and practice, how has practicing Buddhism and thinking about it theologically, so to speak, changed things for you?

Leo Lefebure: The biggest effect has been through the practice of mindfulness. When I first entered a Theravada Buddhist monastery in the north of Thailand in 1986, I was in no way ready for it. The monastic teacher there wanted me to meditate twenty-four hours a day. (Talk about an impossible situation, especially in the evening—when the salamanders would be all over the walls, walking back and forth, trying to keep my mindfulness, was almost impossible.) But some years later I made a later vipassana retreat, and all kinds of things came up. It was very healthy and very cleansing for me. But after wrestling with a number of different issues, one day I was doing walking meditation back and forth, and completely out of the blue came this overwhelming sense that everything would be okay in my life because the Holy Spirit would handle it all. It wasn't that things would go well outwardly. It was that, in the worst possible catastrophes in my life, I didn't have to worry about it.

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Zoketsu Norman Fischer is a Soto Zen practitioner, teacher at the San Francisco Zen Center, and founder of The Everyday Zen Foundation. He took part in both Gethsemani Encounters and was a contributor to *Benedict's Dharma*.

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Now, many times on Catholic retreats, I had prayed the Our Father, "Thy will be done," and so on. However, it was on a whole other level. I was out of the way. It was a very moving experience for me. It's been a wonderful gift to make me more aware of myself, more present, more stable, and more able to handle difficulties, etc. Intellectually, in my theological work, I find Buddhism absolutely fascinating. At first I was completely baffled by the multitude of Buddhist perspectives. When I'm trying to learn what Buddhism is, and it's this and it's that, and I have major people tell me completely contradictory things back and forth....

Norman Fischer: This doesn't, of course, exist in Catholicism.

Leo LeFebure: Catholics are completely united in mind and heart and thought, in everything.

Norman Fischer: That's what I thought.

Leo LeFebure: If you believe that, I have a bridge I would be happy to sell you. But Buddhism intellectually been a tremendous gift for me, especially in terms of the style of interpretation, as I was suggesting what happened after I'd immersed myself in Buddhist texts, then came back to the Christian tradition. For instance, reading the text of Dionysius the Areopagite, where there is the image is Moses going up into the Cloud of Unknowing on the top of Mount Sinai, experiencing God there, being neither himself nor someone else, and just probing and wrestling with that. In that work Dionysius negates all concepts and images. Then he negates the negation. After engagement with the Buddhist tradition, all that tradition has come alive for me in a deeper way.

Norman Fischer: Religion is so idealistic, and idealism can be so poisonous and confusing. What does it really mean to live it—us, the way we are, really living it, what would it really mean? It sounds like you are saying that your encounter with Buddhism showed you what the things that you had been praying for a long time really meant. It didn't change what you had been praying, but it showed you what they really meant.



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Leo Lefebure: People have asked me sometimes if I ever really wanted to become a Buddhist. I've never really felt that myself. I have a tremendous respect for the wisdom of the Buddhist tradition. In my own way I can accept the four noble truths. I think there is a tremendous accuracy of perception there. But in the sense of leaving my own Catholic tradition, that's never been an issue for me. It's been much more an addition, an enrichment to my own practice.

Norman Fischer: When I was here at the first Gethsemani Encounter, I actually got up for vigils at 3:15. I was sitting there in a vigil and I thought, "This is really great. I should become a brother of Gethsemani." Boy, that was a scary thought. I thought to myself, "Things are confused enough as they are. That's all I need, you know, is to pursue that thought." So I figured, "Well, (a), I'd better not pursue that thought; and, (b), I'm not getting up for vigils tomorrow."

Leo Lefebure: That comes from the old belief the Messiah would come at dawn. I would like to throw the question back to you. Coming from a Jewish background, practicing as a Zen teacher for many years, and then coming to this encounter with Jesus, another Jew, and coming back to the psalms—how does that shape your own practice of Zen? How does it change your experience of the psalms?

Norman Fischer: I'm not sure. One thing that I admire about you, Leo, is you really think clearly. You really know how to think. Somebody trained you how to think. I don't think that clearly. There is an advantage and a disadvantage in that. It's not that I don't think. I mean, I think. But thoughts kind of come and go, and some of them persist, and they go this way and that. I feel like I'm groping around. It's like I'm walking along, groping around in the dark with some light going this way and that. It all, in a way it all makes sense.

In a sense, I could say, with some justice and truth, that I've been doing the same thing all my life. Somehow, I was born to do whatever it is that I'm doing. The world calls it Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, but I actually never thought I was doing Buddhism or Christianity or Judaism or anything. I thought I was trying to live and be true to my

thoughts and my feelings. There are a lot of people who come to Buddhism feeling they've had enough of Christianity, or they're disappointed in Christianity or in Judaism. But I never felt that way. I'm just trying to find out what's going on and what it takes to do that. I've always admired many of my Western Buddhist colleagues who figured out that they practice Buddhism in Asia—so if they wanted to do Buddhism, you had to go to Asia and figure out how to do it. I never thought that you could go to Asia. I knew there was Asia in books. But I never thought that a person could go there exactly. I was from a very small town with a short horizon. So whatever appeared in front of me, I embraced it and tried to make it into something I could use. So it's been one thing after another. When I think about it, it's actually pretty confusing, so I don't think about it. I just try to feel my way through it. On that basis, it actually is fine.

As I said, when I first saw how beautiful Christianity was and how I could really take it into my heart, at least in my own way, it was a disturbing thing, because I had to really reckon with all the wounding a Jew feels in relation to Christianity. I grew up among Catholic friends but never really discussed with them their religion. I felt I was somehow conditioned to it. I felt that Catholicism was a mild form of insanity that might end up being harmful to my health. So I'd better be careful. That's how I actually viewed it. When I first began to realize the power and beauty of Jesus and all the dimension that you find in the Catholic tradition, I find it extremely mysterious, disturbing, powerful, and sad, and all these other things I've experienced this time in the mass. The masses have really affected me—this is disturbing to me as a Jew. But it didn't take that long to work through that and see what happened next.

I've been doing lots of study of Bible and Jewish meditation practice again through friendship. My oldest friend is a rabbi, so we've been practicing together. Is that an answer to your question? What did I just say, Leo? You would probably know.

Leo LeFebure: Who is Jesus of Nazareth for you?

Norman Fischer: The power and the mystery of suffering in this

world, which I now feel is not something to end or get rid of but to embrace and understand. That's a big difference.

Leo LeFebure: That's very powerful for me, too.

Norman Fischer: It seems as if Christians are taught to see a suffering person, and not only want to help them because of compassion, but also to see that person literally, truly as Jesus himself. That's a powerful thought: The suffering, the unfortunate, the despised person is God, the absolute. That's a powerful thought.

Leo LeFebure: Obviously, we've never really fully taken that to heart. But to the degree that we have, it's been a very powerful transforming force in our own tradition.

Norman Fischer: It's kind of subversive.

Leo LeFebure: Yes. I liked your image of interreligious dialogue as subversive, because I think that's exactly true. In my own experience it can give such a different angle of vision on certain things and relativize positions in a healthy way—not in the sense of simply denying them or throwing them out, and not in a lazy new age way that we are all saying the same thing without any respect for differences. It is an enrichment and not a threat.

Norman Fischer: That's what dialogue is. I felt in the beginning of our meeting we began as one always does to some degree defensively, despite our openness to one another. In other words, it was "They are saying that, well, I'm going to come back. This is my position, your position/my position." Dialogue to me means really being willing to not know your position. In other words, to have your position utterly questioned within yourself and listen. Then when you feel that way about your position, it doesn't mean you mush everything together, because we are all powerfully conditioned in a way by our traditions, in a good way. That's why in my psalms book, I was not trying to give the psalms a Zen interpretation. Quite the opposite. I was trying to be as true as I could possibly be to the psalms. But I wanted to be honest and say that inevitably, no matter how much I try to be honest with the

psalms, I will always be conditioned by my thirty years of Zen practice. That's always going to be my perspective, no matter how much I do or don't want it to be. It's the same with somebody who is trained in the Catholic tradition.

I don't think we are in any great danger of losing our difference, because it's really embedded in who we are. But when you are willing to have confidence to drop holding onto your own teaching and listen to what's in front of you, then, as you were saying in your own experience with your meditation practice, your own tradition comes alive in a different way. That is the challenge and the beauty of real dialogue, which takes some warming up to and takes some hanging out together to effect. But it's powerful. What we need all over the world is dialogue. Bhante G. said at one point that we don't need to be in dialogue with each other. We need to be in dialogue with the suffering and confused world. I think that's what I was trying to say in my talk. We need to go on from here to be in dialogue with the world. So we need a model dialogue of something that's really transformative in itself.

Continued in **General Discussion (Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002)**

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