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Reflections on Death and Dying Buddhist and Catholic Teachings and Practices

Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D., Fr. James Wiseman, OSB
from **Bulletin 77, July 2006**

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These two presentations on death and dying constituted the "public event" of the Second Monks in the West Conference held at Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, October 26-29, 2006.

REALIZING THE DEATHLESS OR SEEKING REBIRTH IN THE PURE LAND?

BUDDHIST VIEWS ON LIFE, DYING, AND WHAT COMES NEXT

Rev. Heng Sure, PhD

The topic of death and dying is something that Buddhists spend a lot of time with. What I am going to share with you today is virtually unknown out of Asia. There devotion rather than meditation is the number one form of Buddhist practice.

In this country people say, "Buddhism, meditation: same thing, right? They're synonymous." But when you enter a Buddhist monastery in Taiwan, Malaysia, Hong Kong, or Singapore, in Vietnam, Korea, and, more and more, Japan, you don't find zafus and zabutons (meditation cushions and mats). You find bowing benches and big images of the Buddha. You don't meditate; you recite the Buddha's name. You practice a form called Pure Land devotion.

Numerically, historically, the most popular and enduring form of Buddhist practice in Asia over the last 700 years is devotion to the Buddha Amitabha. Amitabha is a Sanskrit name that means limitless light. Amitabha , the Buddha of Limitless Light, is not the historical



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Buddha, Prince Siddhartha of the Sakyamuni clan; he is another Buddha.

On one occasion the historical Buddha said to his monks, "I am going to tell you something that you wouldn't know about unless I opened it up to you." According to the Mahayana or northern tradition he told them about the vows of the Buddha named Amitabha. So, according to the Mahayana or northern tradition, at least, there are two Buddhas right from the beginning.

Like my teacher, the late Master Hsuan Hua, in addition to meditating and reciting the Buddha's name, I do exegesis of texts and lecture on them. This involves opening up the sutra—it's kind of like *lectio divina*. I go into the text, using Chinese and English, and explain it line by line. These texts have been around for 2500 years and they need some interpreting to make them accessible.

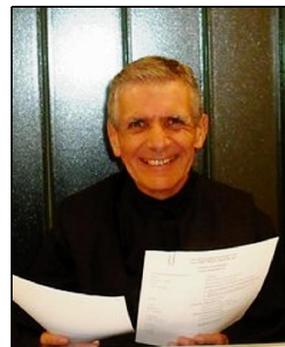
About six or seven years ago, I was lecturing in Burlingame, California. I usually include stories in my lectures to make them more appealing, but on this occasion I didn't have a story. So I said, "We're learning about the Pure Land, about Amitabha. Is there anyone who has a story, a personal experience about someone reciting the Buddha's name and going off to rebirth in the Pure Land at death?"

There were about sixty people in the audience, most of them Asian Americans, along with a fair number of Caucasians, African Americans, and Hispanic Americans. Since Burlingame is in the heart of Silicon Valley, a lot of them were Silicon Valley yuppies, high tech folks. I thought to myself, "What if they do the typical Asian thing and look at the floor as soon as you ask them a question? Unlike Americans who always have an opinion and immediately raise their hand and asked to be called on, the Chinese just clear their throat and say something like, "Grandpa is here and he can speak for the Wongs. And Mrs. Lee can speak for the Lees."

But I thought I would try, so I asked, "Does anyone here have a story?" Four hands shot up in the air. "Do I have a story about Pure Land? . . . Let me tell you."

Berkeley Buddhist
Monastery.

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Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D.**



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The first person to speak was a 35-year-old Stanford grad who was working for Sun Microsystems. He said, "My parents are Buddhists. I wasn't much of a Buddhist myself, but my neighbor in the condominium, Mrs. Wong, we all knew that she was a Buddhist. She was in her 70s. We didn't know much about her. She smiled all the time and was really sweet. She had a cat, and we always heard her tapping her little wooden fish as she chanted, 'Namo Amitabha.' We heard her reciting the sacred name all the time, day and night.

"One day we realized we hadn't seen her for a couple days, so my wife and I went down to her apartment. We had a funny feeling as we knocked on the door and went in. There was Mrs. Wong, sitting on the bed with a smile on her face. She had a new dress on, incense lit, and a picture of the Buddha Amitabha in front of her. She said, 'All of you, be good. Don't worry about me. Take care of yourselves. You should believe in the Buddha. Goodbye.' And then she closed her eyes and died with a smile on her face. There was this very amazing feeling in the room. It was incredible. She was so blissful, and then she was gone, just like that, with a smile on her face.

"We, of course, did all the things you do when someone passes away. But we were amazed, because there was nothing but peacefulness. That's my story."

And then more hands shot up in the air. "My grandma, my grandma. I couldn't believe it. Grandma was always a Buddhist and we knew it, but no one ever paid any attention to her. She was always cooking, always taking care of us, but who knew about grandma's spirituality? One day she went to the hospital and checked herself in. Then she sat upright on her bed and passed away just as peacefully as could be, reciting the Buddha's name. The doctors were amazed."

We spent the whole next hour exchanging Pure Land stories of what happened in these peoples' lives.

So, what can we make of all this? What in the world is going on? What I heard were testimonies of Pure Land devotion, the recitation of the

name of the Buddha Amitabha, the number one practice of Buddhism in East Asia. All I can do is present these stories to you cold. You can make of them what you will.

Now, does everyone go off to rebirth in the Pure Land with a smile on their face? No. These are devout practitioners, and the fact that in a group of 60 we had four stories is a very interesting testimony.

There is a volume called *Stories of People Who Go out to the West*. The stories have been collecting since the Tang Dynasty in the tenth century. The stories are about monks, nuns, lay men, and lay women, and the stories all agree—like the stories from 2002—that someone who recited the name of the Buddha Amitabha with real devotion at the end of life went off to rebirth in the Pure Land peacefully, without raging against the dying of the light. That’s fascinating, because this form of Buddhist spirituality is unknown in the West, even though it’s number one in Asia.

Now, why is that? Basically, it has to do with the threefold formula the Buddha left: *shila*, *samadhi*, and *prajna*: Character, Concentration, Insight; or, Precepts, Concentration, Wisdom. All Buddhist practice begins with character. Fundamentally, with commitment you take the precepts, the first five of which are refraining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and the use of intoxicants. Monastics take 250 vows to be a monk and 50 Bodhisattva precepts on top of that. But the foundation is the same. That’s the *shila* part.

Mind you, four of those precepts are the same as four of the Ten Commandments. (We think that the commandment to honor your father and mother should be a precept too. We’re still learning.) The foundation of morality is what allows you, when you meditate, or whatever practice you might use—recitation, meditation, prostrations, devotions, memorization of scripture, reciting mantras—to arrive at the state of *samadhi*, stillness and purity. With that stillness and purity insight can arise. When situations come up, you know what to do; you’re not confused. You work with your morality; you employ *samadhi*, stillness. You’re not knocked off your feet when life does what life does to you. When storms arise, insight allows you to make your

way through the big waves. That's the foundation: precepts, concentration, wisdom.

This devotional side is something that arose later, in China, as a response, I think, to historical developments. Chinese history is a long and painful history: famine, drought, floods. Locusts would come, the warlord would overthrow the emperor and become the emperor, and then he would be overthrown by another warlord. Armies and tax collectors would come. There was a lot of suffering, and it's possible that the description the Buddha gave of the Pure Land of Amitabha seemed such an attractive alternative to the reality in front of their eyes that the Chinese picked up on the description of the Pure Land in the West and said, "I want to go there."

The teachings of the Pure Land say that there was a monk by the name of Dharmakara who made 48 vows. He said, "In the future I want to create a paradise where suffering is over for anyone who recites my name at the end of life."

That essentially is the story. It's a salvation story, a salvific story. It's a story that is very appealing when life is tough. In order to go to the Pure Land, what is required is faith, vows, and practice (reciting). You have to believe that there is such a world. You have to want to go there. You have to say, "I will be born in that land." And then you have to recite "Namo Amitabha." That, essentially, is the key.

One of the biggest appeals of Pure Land devotion is that anyone can do it. You don't have to have a PhD in comparative religion, you don't have to shave your head and put on a robe, although that helps. Men, women, young, old, all can be born in the Pure Land. For East Asia, this is the answer to the problem of death and dying.

Of course, over the centuries people have adopted all kinds of ways to enhance devotion: there are praises, there is dedication of merit, there are methods for the bedside, there are things to do with the corpse. There are all kinds of ritual practices around the actual physical part of dying. But the main focus is, keep reciting. When the time comes you too will wake up from a lotus flower, born pure. The Buddha Amitabha

will greet you, and you'll be reborn in this land of utmost happiness.

There is more to the story, and it's about what happens when you get to the Pure Land. There you study to be a Bodhisattva, and you make vows to return to the earth. So the Pure Land takes on the character of an academy or a seminary, a place where you learn to become a servant who leads others to salvation.

So that's the story. There is more to Buddhism than meditation. When you go into a Chinese temple and see all those Buddhas up front on the altar, the one in the middle is Amitabha who stands with his hand raised welcoming you to the Pure Land. "Have no fear," he says. "Recite my name, believe you will go there, want to go there."

I'll conclude with a song I composed. Since this is the West, I'll sing it to the accompaniment of an Iroquois rattle.

A Buddha named "The Eternal Light"
Made a vow to save creation.
He made a land where suffering's gone
A place of liberation.

So use his vows and be reborn,
In lotus flowers be lying.
You simply keep his name in mind
And never stop reciting.

A CHRISTIAN'S WAY TO DEATH

James Wiseman, OSB

Spiritual counselors and psychotherapists are well aware of the fear of death that marks the lives of many of their clients and directees. This widespread fear makes it all the more impressive to note how radically different was Mother Teresa of Calcutta's attitude toward death. She often said that there is no need to fear it, since "death is something beautiful: it means going home," going home to God. She likewise loved to recount the wonderful contentment of the thousands of persons whose earthly lives ended in her Homes for the Dying. One

such person told her: "I have lived like an animal in the street but I am going to die like an angel—loved and cared for." [1]

Others who care for the sick have noted how the conviction that one is destined for a heavenly homeland has enabled even young children to make definite and appropriate decisions about their medical care. Sister Margaret Sheffield, while working among terminally ill children at a hospital in Alaska, tells of a twelve-year-old girl, Karen, who was dying of leukemia and who one day unexpectedly announced to the doctor who had just given her an injection:

That's the very last time you are going to prick me. From now on I will not let you put another needle in me. I'm so tired of all this. It won't ever do a bit of good. All I want now is to go to heaven. I'm just waiting. Why does God make me wait so long? I'm all ready to go. [2]

Sheffield reports that the girl then entered into the most peaceful period of her three-year struggle with the disease. All aggressive treatment was terminated and replaced with the simple administration of pain medication. Karen was alert and comfortable for the following three days, said all her "good byes" and, surrounded by her family, slipped into a coma and shortly thereafter expired. Without necessarily being well-versed in all the scriptural terminology of heavenly dwelling places, this young girl had firmly grasped the reality of Christian faith and in so doing was enabled to die a grace-filled death.

The Church's Liturgy

The faith that characterized the spiritual life of Karen, of Mother Teresa, and of so many others who—contrary to the advice of the poet Dylan Thomas—have in fact gone "gently into that good night" is a faith expressed most powerfully when Christians come together in the Church's liturgy. The first of the five Prefaces for Masses of the Dead is a particularly fine summary of Christian belief, especially in the following lines, which begin with a reference to Christ's resurrection:

In him, who rose from the dead, our hope of resurrection dawned.
The sadness of death gives way to the bright promise of immortality.

Lord, for your faithful people life is changed, not ended.
When the body of our earthly dwelling lies in death,
we gain an everlasting dwelling place in heaven.

Those lines, as well as many other passages from the Church's liturgical books dealing with death and dying, encapsulate the faith and hope that have inspired Christians since the first century, giving some of them the courage to face martyrdom and granting others the strength to endure situations of tremendous pain and hardship without giving way to despair. Among other things, those lines from the Preface conclude with one of the most important images found in Scripture to portray the nature of eternal life: the image of a dwelling place, with the related notion of what Mother Teresa called "going home to God." In his Last Supper Discourse in John's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that in his Father's house "there are many dwelling places" and that he is going away "to prepare a place for you, and then I shall come back to take you with me, that where I am you also may be" (John 14:3). For anyone who accepts these words as a sure promise, they provide the reason why one not only need not fear death but can even welcome it as a friend, as did St. Paul when he wrote to the Corinthians: "We are full of confidence and would much rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8).

The Mystery of Death

It is, however, worth noting that, in the words of that same Preface, this is "our *hope*," and as St. Paul wrote long ago, hope that is seen is no longer hope (Romans 8:24). There is a tendency in many of us to think that we know more than we really can about what is, after all, rightly termed *the mystery* of death. It is all the more refreshing, then, to see that some of the most important theological and spiritual writers of the past few decades have candidly acknowledged the limits of their knowledge about death. When Thomas Merton's close friend Victor Hammer was dying in a Lexington, Kentucky hospital, the monk wrote in his journal:

The blunt fact is that it is just not conceivable that Victor Hammer should cease to exist. This is a basic absurdity which Camus confronted, and which religious explanations may perhaps help us only to evade. Instead of facing the inscrutable fact that the dead are no longer

there, and that we don't know what happens to them, we affirm that they are there, somewhere, and [that] we know . . . But we don't know, and our act of faith should be less facile; it should be rooted in our unknowing, not just a further construction of a kind of instinctive feeling for survival.[3]

Similarly, Karl Rahner once gave an interview on German television in which he was asked how he, as a Christian and a theologian, pictured what might lie "beyond" for himself after his death. He replied simply: "I picture nothing for myself. What kind of picture would do? What I affirm as definitive . . . can in no way be compared with the present temporal existence. . . . [T]his is not a case of being unable to put things more clearly. The topic itself excludes all possible images of the beyond." When pressed by the two interviewers, Rahner did go on to acknowledge that he and other believers needed "something to grasp, something to hold on to," but he insisted that even in his need to use traditional images of life after death, he always had to "formulate them anew, modify them also, always in the awareness that they are inadequate and, ultimately, again and again shunt [us] over to sidetracks that lead nowhere." [4]

Even as I, too, acknowledge the need for such images—dwelling places, heavenly banquet, new Jerusalem, God's wiping away of every tear from our eyes, and so many others—I would here like to reflect on the *reality* to which the images refer, even though my reflections will inevitably be somewhat abstract and therefore not as gripping as the pictures offered us so abundantly in the Bible and later Christian tradition. At the very heart of Christian faith is the conviction that we have come forth from a God who lovingly chose us in Christ from all eternity (Ephesians 1:4) and that our entire vocation is bound up with the call to return to God. Although we nowadays tend to avoid referring to life on earth as "a valley of tears" and instead emphasize the goodness of creation and the need to take initiatives in politics and ecology that will enhance earthly life for all creatures, Christian faith will always include the note that this life is not "all there is." When St. Paul wrote to the Philippians of his earnest desire "to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better," even though he felt it was "more

necessary to remain in the flesh on your account" (Philippians 1:23-24), he was giving voice to a permanent part of our Christian heritage. At times this will provoke someone like St. Ignatius of Antioch to urge that nothing be done that would spare him an imminent death by martyrdom. More commonly it will simply lead the followers of Christ to recognize that all they do on earth acquires its ultimate meaningfulness from a definitive realm of transcendence, in which God is "all in all."

Dying Daily to Realize What Matters Most

This is one of the primary reasons, perhaps the most basic reason of all, why so many spiritual writers have recommended some form of the command found in the monastic *Rule of Saint Benedict*: "Keep death daily before your eyes" (4:47). Despite the negative reaction of some persons to such an admonition, it is not at all something morbid.

Rather, it arises from the simple recognition that we are in fact drawing nearer to the time of our death day by day, hour by hour, and that an acceptance of this basic truth will help us live more mindfully. Thus, Karl Rahner, in an essay written near the end of his own life, observed that "death rightly understood is an event involving the whole person" and that it takes place "not by any means necessarily in the chronological moment of the medical exitus . . . but occurs in a true sense throughout the whole of life." [5] Centuries earlier, St. Augustine made essentially the same point when he wrote that "if every person begins to die, that is, is in death as soon as death has begun to show itself in him, . . . then he begins to die as soon as he begins to live." [6]

The challenge is to let a conviction of this truth prevail throughout our life and not merely when our earthly span seems to be drawing to a close. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart had this conviction, for in a letter written a full four year's before his early death, the great composer avowed:

Since death, when we come to consider it closely, is the true goal of our existence, I have formed during the last few years such close relations with this best and truest friend of mankind that his image is not only no longer terrifying to me, but is indeed very soothing and consoling! And I thank my God for graciously granting

me the opportunity of learning that death is the key that unlocks the door to our true happiness. I never lie down at night without reflecting that—young as I am—I may not live to see another day. Yet no one of all my acquaintances could say that in company I am morose or disgruntled. For this blessing I daily thank my Creator and wish with all my heart that each one of my fellow creatures could enjoy it. [7]

This is a quintessential expression of a Christian's attitude toward death, filled as it is with a believing hope and a hopeful faith. It would be hard to find a more eloquent expression of what St. Benedict meant by the charge to "keep death daily before your eyes." To the extent that anyone can make Mozart's sentiments his or her own, to that extent such a person will possess what the composer called "the key to true happiness."

QUESTIONS

Could you say a few words about the meaning of the phrase in the title of your talk "realizing the deathless" and where it comes from.

Heng Sure

"Deathless" is a term found commonly in the teachings of the Theravada. The idea is that the body, the thing that dies, made up of earth, air, fire and water, is very much like a hotel or a suit of clothes; we move in and out of it; we don't really own it. The thing that moves in and out is what we want to pay attention to, to purify, and that would be the Buddha nature. So if we can live skillfully, wisely, compassionately in this suit of clothes, in this hotel room, so to speak, at the same time focusing on the thing that doesn't die, that doesn't come and go, and use that to benefit living beings, to purify, to still, then we have done what the Buddha did. The Buddha was one who embodied the deathless while still in his human form, so that when he cast off that form in Nirvana, the deathless manifested itself. In fact, that is the true self.

What happens to someone who takes his or her own life?

Wiseman

In the Christian tradition, one can only sympathize with someone who kills him or herself. We often feel that we have no way of knowing what tremendous deep pain and suffering led a person to do this. But it is never something that is counseled or recommended. It is only something that one could sympathize with. As some of you may know, suicide is, I believe, the second leading cause of death among teen-agers. We all know how turbulent the teenage years are for many people, but still, we often underestimate the real anxiety and turmoil that go through a young person's mind, leading him or her to take that path.

Regrettably there was a time, I think for centuries, within my church when someone who committed suicide was not allowed to be buried in holy ground. We realize now how insensitive that was; it manifested a judgment that none of us should dare to make, because we can never know what led a person to take such a tragic step.

Heng Sure

In Taiwan right now there is something they are describing an epidemic of suicide, as if it were a kind of virus. The Abbot of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, Master Heng Lyu, who is here with us, was in China and spoke about the large number of suicides there. The statistics are really disturbing, because the number of suicides is growing among young people, among women in particular.

We echo the wisdom expressed by Fr. Wiseman when we say that suicide doesn't help. Buddhism does talk about past lives and future lives, about something that continues on from one to the next. If you kill, you violate a precept, even if the life you take is your own. It's a karmic error, and there's retribution for that. The way you depart is in anger, confusion, and grief, all mixed up together. So the seeds of that will be manifested in a future life will bring you back in a form "having killed," having made the journey from one suit of clothes to the next in a state of confusion and anger and violent emotion. The next rebirth has an inauspicious beginning. That being the case, suicide doesn't solve anything. You will come back more confused than before.

It's not a simple thing at all to talk someone out of a state in which they can take their own life, but one way is to wake individuals up to the network of families and relationships that they're living in right this minute. Usually if someone commits suicide it's because of isolation, loneliness, alienation, being cut off and broken. Suicide is seen as an answer, a solution to the problem. But if you can remind someone at that point that they are children of parents, grandchildren of grandparents, great-grandchildren of great-grandparents, present or not, you may help them to see that they represent the hopes and aspirations of all these generations, are alive in their flesh at this very moment. We are siblings of siblings, some are students and teachers, some are parents of children. Right now we are knit into this fabric of relationships. When someone suddenly departs, all the fabric gets torn. Being awake to that reality is another reason to think twice, to be patient, and to wait it out.

I was very impressed by the similarity of the two stories. Both Mrs. Wong and Karen died so peacefully because of their hope and their faith. How would you answer the agnostic who would say they were victims of a delusion, they simply convinced themselves of something that is really not true? That conviction helped them die peacefully, but that's all. Any delusion will do, because the whole point is to help people die peacefully.

Wiseman

I don't think you could absolutely convince an agnostic away from that position, because, as I said, one simply does not what is on the other side of death. For us Christians—and, I suspect, for Buddhists too—it is part of our faith that life here is not all there is. If someone responds, "Surely it's a delusion, wishful thinking," you could not necessarily convince that person that it is otherwise, but I find it a superficial response, and I doubt anyone in this room would find it acceptable.

Heng Sure

There is yet another Buddhist list—we've been going through a lot of lists this weekend—that is called the Eight Difficulties. One of those, number seven, is "Worldly Knowledge and Argumentative Intelligence."

Worldly knowledge and argumentative intelligence is something that can keep you blind to wonder of all kinds. The fact that gravity works is then just a fact. That music and mathematics bears a relationship to petals of flowers and the way they're organized in nature—well, who cares? You can explain that mathematically. Some people are just that way.

Agnostics and some folks who hold to "scientism" are somewhat the same. So what can you say to someone who believes that science holds all the answers and there's no room for emotion or feeling or faith, because they are all "fuzzy"? You might say, "Well if you don't believe that there's anything coming, that there's any transformation, how is it that only humanity is not subject to Newton's first law of thermodynamics, which says that matter turns to energy, energy turns to matter, that nothing is created or destroyed, nothing lost. If this is the case, why would the soul fall away?"

In fact, we are part of the Dharma realm, coming back now as matter, soon to be energy, then to reincarnate. If they can listen to anything, maybe you can use science and throw it back at them.

Does the Pure Land have a social dimension?

Heng Sure

The story I told you about Shakyamuni Buddha and the Pure Land is unique in that it's the only time the Buddha ever spoke without being asked. As I said, this is a Mahayana story. He said, "When you recite my name with your last breath, you arrive in paradise. You're reborn in a lotus flower. There are nine different grades, depending on how sincerely you recited. When the flower opens, the Buddha Amitabha is there, and depending upon your sincerity, there are eight great Bodhisattvas surrounding him, all of whom welcome you, and you know their names and their stories. So there's very much a sense of family, of the saints.

The Pure Land is described in very glowing terms. There are birds that speak the Dharma. There are pools of water for you to bathe in; your cares are washed away and your thirst is quenched. The social

dimension is very much present; compassion is the keynote; Amitabha is the Buddha of great kindness and compassion. So it's not at all cold or analytical. That's why it is the Buddhism of devotion.

In Christianity we have all sorts of rituals to build up this sense of community with those who have gone before us in death. For example, in our monastic refectory a candle is put at the place of the monk who has died. Does Buddhism have something similar?

Heng Sure

The number one symbol of passing is a plaque. The family of the deceased will request that a plaque be set up in a side altar of a monastery. These plaques are very ornate. They can be carved out of ivory or made of a simple piece of paper. They are shaped like a lotus blossom, symbolizing the Pure Land where you hope the soul is now residing. So you write the name on the plaque and put the plaque up. And then there are special chants that are recited in front of that plaque. And the family, if they're following the Chinese tradition, comes back every seven days for a period of 49 days; the first and the seventh are the most important. There are teachings about the period between leaving the body and the 49th day. So, there are rituals, candles, lamps, incense, food offerings. The latter are often made in a ceremony of remembrance, in which a meal is shared with the monks and nuns who do the chanting. A Japanese tradition for special ceremonies of remembrance is to observe them at six months, one year, and seven years. The idea is that you're doing this for the deceased, but the ceremonies are also for the healing of the survivors.

Is the Kingdom of Heaven within?

Wiseman

The phrase comes from the Gospels, which were originally written in Greek. They've been translated into English in various ways. I've read that probably the better translation of that phrase is "The Kingdom of Heaven is among you." It's not necessarily referring to something within the individual person, but rather to something that is here in your midst. It was Jesus' way of saying that the definitive way in which we are all called to exist—as brothers and sisters of one another and as

sons and daughters of God—is already taking place, even if not fully manifested.

Other people, more traditionally, have understood it to mean that God is within. To me, that probably is not the most accurate translation, and it probably also leads to an overly individualistic kind of spirituality.

How many petals does the lotus have?

Heng Sure

The teaching of Pure Land is not related to petals on an individual lotus, but to nine grades of lotus. One interesting thing about Pure Land is that the teaching sounds very much like the theistic view. Amitabha is there, there's lots of teaching, there are rules, there's an entrance an exit to the Pure Land. The nine grades are nine kinds of lotus. You are reborn in one or the other, depending on how well you recited here. They are called "Higher higher, higher middle, higher lower, middle higher, middle middle..." They are all good lotuses. (Some lotuses, however, are more equal than others.)

How well you recite determines where you are reborn. Violent criminals, if they are sincere and recite the Buddha's name at the end of life, also will be reborn in the Pure Land. It just takes longer for them to come out of the lotus. Your karma is wiped away while you're in the lotus. What a wonderful vow. Imagine the monk's mind as he created this paradise. He allowed even people who violate the civil law to go to the Pure Land. As long as you believe it's possible, make the vow to go there, and recite, there will be a way to wipe away the sins of your past life, even if you've been a criminal.

Why a lotus? A lotus is a plant whose blossom is above the water and pure, but whose roots are in the mud. The idea is that the Bodhisattva, the Awakened Human is firmly rooted in this world but their pure mind is unstained by worldly dust and turmoil.

Does it still make sense to pray for the dead

Wiseman

The short answer is yes. In our Church the month of November is a special time of prayer for the souls of the dead. One of the most common beliefs throughout the world is that this life is not all that there is. Within our tradition, there are those who are already with the Lord, there are those who are on the way, meaning that some further purification is needed (Purgatory), and there are those who comprise what is called "the Church Militant," those who are striving here on earth. But these three comprise the one body of Christ, with Christ as head. There is communion possible among all of them. Throughout the year, but especially in the month of November, we are mindful of the need and the call—and the opportunity—to pray for those who have gone before us. We do that, in fact, in every single Eucharist. In whatever Eucharistic Prayer is chosen, you will always find a commemoration of the dead, and that is because they are still part of us, part of one large body of the communion of saints.

Heng Sure

In the Buddhist tradition there is very much a sense of what we call the transference of merit, the dedication of the merit that follows every meritorious activity. For example, if you're meditating or bowing to the Buddha or reciting scripture—practices that laypeople or monastics do—the last thing you do is send out the merit; you share the goodness. It's up to you where your vows go, but there's very much a sense that you can dedicate merit to beings in what is called the six-spoked wheel of rebirth: the hell realm, which in the Buddhist tradition is very hot; then the level of ghosts, which would correspond to a purgatory realm; then the realm of animals. You would dedicate merit with the wish to end the suffering of those beings, pull them out of their misery in those places. There are said to be the three wholesome destinies: the realm of humans; and then the realm of the Asuras, which is very interesting because they correspond very much to titans, those beings who are always struggling with the gods; and then the realm of devas, different forms of gods.

Further, there is a sutra in the Mahayana called the Sutra of Earth Treasury. It is about a Bodhisattva, an awakened being, who vows to stay in hell until hell is emptied, which is to say, forever. Interestingly enough, he was a she. When she made her vows, she wanted to rescue

her mother, who she knew was suffering. She said, "If my mother can be saved, I will willingly go to hell to rescue all beings." The sutra describes her lifetime as a woman and her incredible filial regard. So there is very much a sense that those in purgatory and beings who are suffering can be elevated by the heart and the work of the practitioner.

Wiseman

One of the questioners pointed out that there was a striking similarity between the deaths of Mrs. Wong and Karen. There is another similarity in our traditions. One of Rev. Heng Sure's main points today was devotion to the name of the Buddha, the constant repetition of Amitabha. I think every Christian here is aware, though the Buddhists may not be, that there is also a very, very revered tradition within Christianity of devotion to the name of Jesus. It's especially pronounced in our Eastern Orthodox Churches, where the so-called Jesus Prayer is almost the prayer par excellence. It has slightly different forms, but one traditional way is "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." One could lovingly repeat that thousands of times. There is a beautiful little book, *The Way of the Pilgrim*, that shows how a simple Russian pilgrim in the 19th century attains such depths of spirituality by lovingly repeating that prayer.

But it doesn't have to be that special formula. There's another beautiful book by a French scholar who's probably dead by now, Irénée Hausherr. The title of the book is simply *The Name of Jesus*. It traces through twenty centuries Christian devotion to the name of Jesus, not simply so that by reciting the name one will then come into the Christian equivalent of the Pure Land, but simply because the name represents the person of Jesus, and to be devoted to the Lord is perhaps best expressed by the loving repetition of the sacred name, Lord Jesus Christ. I myself often use a somewhat different formula. I've learned a lot from the Buddhists, whose concern is not just for human beings, but for all sentient beings, so I will often just pray again and again, "Lord Jesus Christ, may all beings have joy, peace, and happiness." Saint John Chrysostom once said that the value of these short prayers is that they keep you from becoming distracted. If you have long prayers, your mind is often somewhere else. But if you just have that one little verse, and especially one that means a lot to you,

it's a wonderful way to pray. I think the fact that we pray in the name of Jesus and Rev. Heng Sure's tradition prays to Amitabha shows that there is something very human about that way of devotion.

Heng Sure

I am sure many of you know J.D. Salinger's book *Franny and Zoe*, which refers to the same prayer. Some enterprising Buddhist/Catholic dialoguer incorporated Vipassana mindfulness with counting the breath, so it became "Lord Jesus" (inhaling), "Have mercy" (exhaling), integrating breath count with the Jesus Prayer.

[1]Mother Teresa of Calcutta, *My Life for the Poor*, ed. José Luis González-Balado and Janet N. Playfoot (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 89-90.

[2]Margaret Sheffield, "Conversations with Dying Children," *Spiritual Life* 33 (1987):33.

[3]Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 260.

[4]Karl Rahner, "What Do I Mean When I Say: Life after Death?" in *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews, 1965-1982*, ed. Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 91-92.

[5]Karl Rahner, "Following the Crucified," in idem, *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality*, ed. Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 146.

[6]St. Augustine, *The City of God*, 13.10.

[7]Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart to his father, 4 April 1787, quoted in Francis Carr, *Mozart & Constanze* (New York: Avon Books, 1985), 80.

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