

Rohr, Richard. *The Universal Christ* (pp. 207-212). The Crown Publishing Group.

Love and Suffering as Ways of Knowing

I hope you will forgive me for beginning this section with a rather absolute statement. In the practical order of life, if we have never loved deeply or suffered deeply, we are unable to understand spiritual things at any depth. Any healthy and “true” religion is teaching you how to deal with suffering and how to deal with love. And if you allow this process with sincerity, you will soon recognize that it is actually love and suffering that are dealing with you. Like nothing else can! **Even God has to use love and suffering to teach you all the lessons that really matter. They are his primary tools for human transformation.** You probably did not realize it at the time, but whenever you were in that honeymoon stage of a new love, you were temporarily enjoying a kind of unitive, nondual, or contemplative mind. During that graced period you had no time for picking fights or being irritated by nonessentials; you were able to overlook offenses, and even forgive your sisters and brothers and maybe even your parents. Mothers think that their sons with new girlfriends have been reborn! They are actually kind, and pick up their clothes; they even say hello and pardon me. I always loved giving pre-marriage instructions because the engaged couples were usually living in a highly teachable time, and nodded in agreement at everything I said. So little pushback.

Conversely, in the days, weeks, and years after a great grief, loss, or death of someone close to you, you often enter that same unitive mind, but now from another doorway. The magnitude of the tragedy puts everything else in perspective, and a simple smile from a checkout girl seems like a healing balm to your saddened soul. You have no time for or interest in picking fights, even regarding the stuff that used to bother you. It seems to take a minimum of a year to get back to “normal” after the loss of anyone you were deeply bonded to, and many times you never get back to “normal.” You are reconfigured forever. Often this is the first birth of compassion, patience, and even love, as **the heart is softened and tenderized through sadness, depression, and grief. These are privileged portals into depth and truth.**

But how do we retain these precious fruits over the long haul? **Love and suffering lead us toward the beginnings of a contemplative mind if we submit to them at all, and many of us do submit to them for a while. Too often, though, most of us soon return to dualistic inner argumentation and our old tired judgments, trying to retake control.** Most of us leave this too-naked garden of Adam and Eve and enter instead into the fighting and competing world of Cain and Abel. Then we “settle in the land of Nod [or wandering], East of Eden” (Genesis 4:16), before we find ourselves longing and thirsting for what we once tasted in Eden. Perhaps we need to wander for a while to find the path—or before we want it real bad.

If we have some good teachers, we will learn to develop a conscious **nondual mind**, a choiceful contemplation, some spiritual practices or disciplines that can return us to unitive consciousness on an ongoing and daily basis. Whatever practice it is, it must become “our daily bread.” That is the consensus of spiritual masters through the ages. The general words for these many forms of practice (“rewiring”) are “meditation,” “contemplation,” any “prayer of quiet,” “centering prayer,” “chosen solitude,” but it is **always some form of inner silence**, symbolized by the Jewish Sabbath rest. Every world religion—at the mature levels—discovers some forms of practice to free us from our addictive mind, which we take as normal. No fast-food religion, or upward-bound Christianity, ever goes there and thus provides little real nutrition to sustain people through the hard times, infatuations, trials, idolatries, darkness, and obsessions that always eventually show themselves. Some of us call today’s form of climbing religion the “prosperity gospel,” which is quite common among those who still avoid great love and great suffering. It normally does not know what to do with darkness, and so it always projects darkness elsewhere. Can you not think of many examples immediately?

Starting in the 1960s, our increased interaction with Eastern religions in general, and Buddhism in particular, helped us recognize and rediscover our own very ancient Christian contemplative tradition. Through Cistercians like Thomas Merton and later Thomas Keating, Christians realized that we had always had these teachings ourselves, but they had slipped into obscurity, and they played almost no part in our sixteenth-century Reformations, or in the Catholic Counter-Reformation. In fact, quite the contrary. Almost all the thinking on all sides has been highly dualistic and divisive, and thus violent, in the last five hundred years. There were no major nonviolent revolutions till the middle of the twentieth century.

When Western civilization set out on its many paths of winning, accomplishment, and conquest, the contemplative mind seemed uninteresting or even counterproductive to our egoic purposes. The contemplative mind got in the way of our left-brain philosophy of progress, science, and development, which were very good and necessary in their own way—but not for soul knowledge. What we lost was almost any notion of paradox, mystery, or the wisdom of unknowing and unsayability—which are the open-ended qualities that make biblical faith so dynamic, creative, and nonviolent. But we insisted on “knowing,” and even certain knowing! All the time and every step of the way! This is no longer the enlightening path of Abraham, Moses, Mary, or Jesus. It is a rather late and utterly inadequate form of religion, and probably why so very many today (half the Western populations?) say they are now “spiritual but not religious.” I cannot fault them for that; yet again, I hear remnants of the old dualistic mind.

So Why This Interest in Buddhism?

I am convinced that in many ways Buddhism and Christianity shadow each other. They reveal each other’s blind spots. **In general, Western Christians have not done**

contemplation very well, and Buddhism has not done action very well. Although in recent decades we are seeing the emergence of what is called “Engaged Buddhism,” which we have learned from teachers like Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama. There is a reason that most art shows Jesus with his eyes open and Buddha with his eyes closed. In the West, we have largely been an extroverted religion, with all the superficiality that represents; and the East has largely produced introverted forms of religion, with little social engagement up to now. Taking the risk of overgeneralization, I will say that we did not understand the human mind or heart very well, and they did not understand service or justice work very well. Thus we produced rigid capitalism and they often fell into ideological communism. Both religions tried to breathe with one lung—and that is not good breathing. Or better said, you can’t just inhale and you can’t just exhale.

At its best, Western Christianity is dynamic and outflowing. But the downside is that this entrepreneurial instinct often caused it to either be subsumed by or totally trample on the cultures we entered—instead of transforming them at any deeper levels. We became a formal and efficient religion that felt that its job was to tell people what to see instead of how to see. It sort of worked for a while, but it no longer does, in my opinion.

I have lived in Buddhist monasteries in Japan, Switzerland, and the USA. They are definitely more disciplined than most Christian monasteries, and definitely much more serious. The first question out of a Japanese abbot’s mouth to me was “What is your practice?” The first question when meeting a Christian abbot would probably be something like “How was your trip?” or “Do you have everything you need for while you are here?” or “Are you hungry?” Both approaches have their strengths and their limitations. In most ways Buddhism is more a way of knowing and cleaning the lens than a theistic religion concerned with metaphysical “God” questions. In telling you mostly how to see, Buddhism both appeals to us and threatens us because it demands much more vulnerability and immediate commitment to a practice—more than just “attending” a service, like many Christians do. Buddhism is more a philosophy, a worldview, a set of practices to free us for truth and love than it is a formal belief system in any notion of God. It provides insights and principles that address the how of spiritual practice, with very little concern about what or Who is behind it all. That is its strength, and I am not sure why that should threaten any “believer.”

By contrast, Christians have spent centuries trying to define the what and Who of religion—and usually gave folks very little how, beyond quasi-“magical” transactions (Sacraments, moral behaviors, and handy Bible verses), which of themselves often seem to have little effect on how the human person actually lives, changes, or grows. These transactions often tend to keep people on cruise control rather than offer any genuinely new encounter or engagement. I am sorry to have to say that, but it is my almost-fifty-year experience as a priest and teacher in many groups.

Transformation, or salvation, is so much more than a favor that Jesus effects for certain individuals in a heavenly ledger somewhere. It is a full map for a very real human journey. Not really an absolute necessity, but surely a great gift! And this map is also a participatory experience with a community of some sort, even with the community of unfolding history. I believe the Christian notion of salvation is not just personal enlightenment, but also social connection and communion—which ironically ends up being divine connection too. This alone is full incarnational Christianity, with both the vertical line and the horizontal line forming our central logo of the cross. Never trust only the vertical line or only the horizontal line. They must cross and intertwine and become one. And that is indeed crucifixion.

Spirituality is about honoring the human journey, loving it, and living it in all its wonder and tragedy. There is nothing really “supernatural” about love and suffering. It is completely natural, taking us through the deep interplay of death and life, surrender and forgiveness, in all their basic and foundational manifestations. “God comes to you disguised as your life,” as my friend Paula D’Arcy says so well. Who would have thought? I was told it was about going to church.

Authentic Christianity is not so much a belief system as a life-and-death system that shows you how to give away your life, how to give away your love, and eventually how to give away your death. Basically, how to give away—and in doing so, to connect with the world, with all other creatures, and with God.

Rohr, Richard. *The Universal Christ* (pp. 207-212). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.