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From What to How: Christian Holiness and Western Buddhism

“I’m so inspired by your journey into Christianity, that I’ve started to study about Zen Buddhism,” my friend Anne said. Her bright smile and enthusiasm almost made me forget that indeed, this was a puzzling statement. One of my closest Dutch friends, we had shared infinite intimate talks over every type of food in the restaurant scene of Amsterdam. We talked about our emotional life, ambitions, ethical dilemmas, and—in elaborate ways, about my journey back into becoming a convinced Christian. Now I found that all that sharing had indeed had an effect on her—she saw in me that religion can be a meaningful part of life, and so she decided to become a more spiritual person herself. Rather than embracing Christ, however, she began to engage Zen Buddhism.

My experience with Anne is not incidental. Buddhism and Buddhism-derived thought and practices have become part and parcel of the religious landscape in the West. I myself explored its philosophies with much interest before I became a Christian. Practically all of my non-Christian friends in the Netherlands are inspired and guided by Buddhist thought in one way or another. Clearly, we must observe that Buddhism, adapted in a Western context, somehow succeeds in addressing the needs, questions, and longings of spiritually searching Westerners. What is more, I have been consistently observing that generally speaking, Christianity as offered in the Seventh-day Adventist Church does not seem to adequately address these unique needs, questions, and longings. In this article, I want to account for these statements—and make a plea for taking their implications seriously. I will argue that the popularity of Buddhism in the West must alert us that we need a shift in our Christian culture. Specifically, I will argue that our Christian culture must shift from stressing “what to be” to guiding in “how to be.” This is no small change—it will require a sensitive rethinking of our styles of discipling and being church. In my view, however, such a change is essential if the Adventist Church wishes
to reach out successfully to our unchurched, Buddhism-inspired Western friends, as well as reaching into the younger generations in our church that share a similar sociological profile (and who are on a mass exodus out of the church).

**Themes in the Spiritual Quest of Unchurched Westerners**

Dominant themes in the spiritual quest of unchurched Westerners are not necessarily occultist or esoteric. In fact, they are often remarkably compatible with Christian ideas about holiness or sanctified living. Surveying Buddhism-derived literature for Westerners, there is a lot of emphasis on goals that are reminiscent of the fruits of the Spirit: inner peace, genuine compassion, deep joy, practical wisdom, fulfillment, happiness, thankfulness, freedom, kindness, etc. Moreover, Buddhism is viewed as a guide in daily life concerns that are also very important for Seventh-day Adventists: from physical and emotional health to romantic love and parenting. Western Buddhism is primarily concerned with personal growth, both emotional and relational.

Let me bring these themes to life in the journeys of real people, people I have met all over the world. Kees is a 35-year-old social science teacher. He has been struggling his whole life with intense anxiety due to a number of emotionally abusive experiences in his childhood. Kees’ anxiety has led him to dive deeply into the world of Eastern philosophies in a quest for inner peace and emotional-mental development. He meditates daily, has a black belt in a spiritually formative type of karate, has attended scores of lectures and read mountains of books on Buddhist-inspired thought and practice, and assists a man who claims to be enlightened in documenting his technical knowledge about this “highest level” of consciousness. For Kees, his deepest drive in all of this is to become a person who is able to love. From his search, he has acquired an incredible amount of wisdom and insight into and mastery over his own person and is able to be a truly meaningful mentor for his students and in particular for those who experience emotional problems and bullying.

Loes is a 30-year-old lady who runs her own spiritual center. She suffered a major burn-out years ago, which led her on a profound search into the workings of her psyche and body. For months, she stayed in a monastery in Nepal to learn about Buddhism. She explored reiki, fasting, energetic treatments, various types of yoga, meditation, foot reflexology, Zen-shiatsu, and much more. Her current center offers workshops on vegetarian eating, sells energy-enhancing magnetic jewelry, provides yoga classes, and massage therapy. She finds answers in Buddhism in regard to love, wisdom, and health. She has developed an impressive amount of
control over her burn-out and a wealth of insight into the human mind and body. Moreover, though physically still more limited than most others, she lives her life with a profound sense of joy and gratefulness.

A final example is 31-year-old Caroline. She grew up in a liberal Christian family and as a young woman started searching for something more meaningful and relevant to her life than her religious heritage. She desired inner peace and confidence, and desired to learn both to truly love herself as well as compassionately contribute to the world. She naturally dived into an exploration of Buddhism. She has visited various Buddhist countries, regularly practices meditation, and reads books about Buddhist philosophy. In her experience, Buddhist thought and practice help her to overcome inner anxiety, be more assertive, learn to trust ‘life’ and its direction, and to have more space inside to really love others.

I could continue with similar profiles in many shapes and forms, including those of young Adventists, or those that have already left the church. In these profiles it should cause us to be puzzled to see that the spiritual needs and goals of unchurched Westerners are really not that far from Christian goals or what Christians think they can offer to the world (peace, love, meaning, health). So why is it then, that we do not attract the crowds? What exactly is it that makes Buddhist thought and practice seem so much more relevant to people in the West?

**The Power of Buddhism in the West: The Focus on “How”**

It is important to understand the link between the spiritual needs of unchurched Westerners and the popularity of Buddhism and Buddhism-derived thought and practice. I would like to reduce the complex answer to this question to one single feature that will be critical for us to understand as we evaluate how we present Christianity in the West. That is: Western forms of Buddhism have a very strong how-focus. This means that they do not only state where we should be going or what we should be, they also explicate how we can get there. The approach is “hands-on.” It takes specific problems and suggests tangible methods for dealing with them.

To illustrate, notice this online excerpt from a blog called “The Zen of Anger—5 Tips to Overcome Negative Reactions” by a Buddhist-inspired Westerner, on a website called “Tiny Buddha: Simple Wisdom for Complex Lives”

**Get in touch with your anger.**

Do the following exercise when you have at least thirty minutes of uninterrupted time.
Find a comfortable seated position. Close your eyes and think of what your anger looks like. What color or images do you see? Where in your body do you store anger? Pay attention to body temperature, clinched fists, heart rate, muscle tension, and butterflies in your stomach.

Practice deep breaths throughout this exercise, and take a break if the feelings become too intense.

When you’re ready, open your eyes and take a deep breath. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Pick up a notepad and jot down all your angry thoughts.

Don’t overthink this—keep the stream of thoughts flowing without editing your responses. Spend at least five minutes recording what, where, when, and around whom you feel most angry.

Read the list and decide what are your three biggest anger triggers and/or situations. Make a circle around the top three.

On another sheet of paper, write three strategies for remedying each one.

**For example: Problem #1:**

I can’t stand my job.

**Strategies:**

- Update my resume by Friday at noon.
- Contact two people and network about possible job openings by Thursday at 5:00 p.m.
- Call my mentor today and invite her to lunch in exchange for business ideas. (Pick up the tab.)

Repeat this exercise frequently, and don’t worry if some of the same issues show up. Problem-solving takes practice and patience.

This excerpt brings out several characteristics of Western forms of Buddhism. First, it recognizes that emotional problems, such as anger, need to be addressed in a methodical way (overcoming anger is not a mysterious spiritual process—it can and must be intentionally tackled). Second, the methods that are suggested are very specific and easy to imitate (e.g., use 30 minutes, breathe in through your nose, record your thoughts). Third, the blog acknowledges that emotional/spiritual growth has its own particular nature and will inevitably involve repeated failure on the way to success.

Perhaps it would be important at this point to offer a brief explanation of how the topic of this article started to occupy my mind. Three years ago, I joined a 3-day retreat on Buddhism for Westerners in a city in Nepal. About 20 Westerners from Italy to Norway and from America to France,
listened intently to the stimulating teaching and training by a down-to-earth American Buddhist monk. I left that weekend with one question burning in my mind: Why does it seem that Buddhism is so much clearer about how spiritual growth works than Christianity is?

My question emerged from the fact that I became impressed with the methodical nature of Buddhism. Buddhism and Western Buddhist-derived thought and practice not only rehearse the main goals (e.g., Enlightenment, compassion, peace), but also the sub-goals (e.g., the various stages of consciousness development) that are to be reached on the way to the big goal. They not only state sub-goals, but also the specific methods one can use to reach these sub-goals. They not only state methods, but also alternative methods that better fit particular individual needs as well as explanations for why a particular method might not be working for a particular person or why someone is stuck in his or her growth. In short, Buddhist and Western Buddhist-derived thought and practice recognize that spiritual growth is complex. It is not something that will just happen. It is a tangible journey through a series of obstacles, most of which have already been experienced and documented before, and which must be overcome with intentional techniques, often based on centuries of practice and understanding. Buddhist methodologies of spiritual growth are founded on extensive observation of the human body and psyche and therefore highly informed about the nature of a soul’s progress.

The methodical nature of Western Buddhist teaching connects to the postmodern needs of unchurched Westerners to be able to experiment and experience. It gives guidelines, and then allows one to explore their effects. It provides practical, doable answers to questions about how to live a better life.

The Presentation of Christianity: The Focus on “What”

As a relatively new Christian, I am finding that the way Christianity is presented in our Western churches is roughly like this: We reiterate our goals by stating and restating what we should be. We preach and teach that we should be loving, honest, faithful, courageous, etc., but we seem to have a lack of clarity about how we can actually attain such desirable traits of character—the specific paths we must travel to be transformed. If Buddhists are right and common Christian themes like becoming dead to self, loving God and neighbor, and living a life without worry and fear are really very hard to reach (something that most of us would corroborate from our experience), it seems that we are missing something.

Here is what I have observed about the extent and nature of teaching our members the how of becoming a sanctified person or attaining the
fruits of the Spirit. As Christians, we believe that spiritual growth can only be the result of God’s work in us, though we have to do our part to make this possible. This tension is succinctly summed up in Phil 2:12b-13: “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” For Christians, spiritual growth emerges from a combination of Divine and human effort. The Divine hand in our spiritual growth is a mystery. We cannot decipher, analyze, or institutionalize it. It is God’s very unique molding of every creature. This is quite a contrast with the methodical approaches we have looked at, which focus primarily on human effort. However, as Christians, we do not believe that growth is only a gift. We need to “work out” too. And here is the rub. I would like to propose that the idea of God’s initiating work in sanctifying us, sets us up for treating Christian spiritual growth as a rather nebulous realm. That is, we focus on the mysterious Divine effort (the what, the end result) and do not elaborate very much on the practical human effort (the how, the journey). This leads to the puzzling situation of having very high ideals (e.g., becoming dead to self!) without much practical guidance on how to get there, except for knowing that somehow God will do it for us. Perhaps it even causes us to not take the ideals seriously enough, because the lack of clarity on how to reach them makes them overly abstract and apparently unreachable.

Where we do specify what humans can do in the process of working out their salvation, we focus on three things: prayer, Bible study, and, very importantly, surrender. I have repeatedly observed in countless conversations with church members as well as in spiritual growth related study materials that these three things are presented as what the human effort looks like. I would like to humbly argue that these three things are not enough. Let us look at prayer and Bible study first. Please let me stress that I believe these two things are crucial for any type of growth in our journey with Christ; however, when we are dealing with specific questions about mental/emotional/spiritual development, such as how to stop being jealous, develop a peaceful heart, overcome anger, concentrate our mind on God alone etc., a general reference to prayer and the Bible is not enough. It would be like telling a chain smoker, “You will find all the resources you need to stop smoking when you pray and read your Bible.” Sure, the smoker will find profound principles that are related to his problem, such as the importance of treating our body as a temple of the Holy Spirit, but we all realize that he will need something more, and that is why our church has developed elaborate stop-smoking courses to guide smokers out of their habit. In the same way, we cannot say to a person struggling with mental/emotional/spiritual issues such as anxiety, hurt, or selfishness: you will overcome this through prayer and Bible study. Prayer
makes room for the Divine effort and the Bible helps us understand much about human nature, but it is not a hand book about the steps of emotional or mental growth, just like it is not a handbook on physical health or science, even though it touches on all these things.

Our third common answer as to how to grow into holiness is the need to surrender. I would like to encourage you to observe in your own church context how often phrases such as “surrender it to God” or “just lean on Jesus” are used as a way to deal with complex spiritual/emotional challenges. Surrender is presented as the core of the journey from being broken and sinful to being restored into God’s image. And indeed, surrender is crucial. Unfortunately, that essential act of surrender is not accomplished simply by stating the need for it. In fact, from a Buddhist perspective, it is one of the hardest things a person can be asked to do (and, again, I think we can confirm this by our experience). So again, we need more.

Let us go back to our unchurched, spiritually-searching friends and imagine their position from what we have discussed so far. Imagine you are an unchurched person looking for inner peace. In Buddhist-derived thought and practice you would find knowledge about the nature, sources, and progression of cultivating peace, often based on centuries of observation. You would have access to tangible methods and teachers that you can experiment with in order to cultivate peace. You would find like-minded others in this sub-culture who share in your journey and who can relate to your specific challenges and victories because they are also intentionally applying themselves to cultivating peace. You would find specific understanding, tangible methods, and, likely, real progress. In many Adventist contexts, on the other hand, you would find reference to a God who can solve your problems and give you a new heart when you (somehow) surrender to him, pray, and read your Bible. Perhaps, if you are overly stressed or anxious, someone might refer you to professional help outside the church context. Unless God would work a miracle in your life as an answer to Christian prayer, is it not understandable that you would tend to feel more attracted to the tangible, methodical Buddhist path than to the nebulous, mysterious Christian alternative?

Very often have I seen that my unchurched friends were dealing with emotional and relational problems, and to my regret I saw them flocking to Eastern methods like mindfulness and meditation and even magic like dowsing rods, without knowing how I could offer an alternative from my Christian church context that would be equally meaningful or helpful to them. I knew that coming to a church service would in no way meet their needs, and joining a standard Bible study would not address their questions. The question is, can we do better? And if so, how?
Conclusion and Recommendations

In this article I have attempted to show that there is a strong connection between Western Buddhist-derived thought and practice and the needs and aspirations of unchurched Westerners. There is a group of unchurched Westerners that is interested in spirituality, but in a very particular way. They turn to religious traditions in order to grow and improve tangibly in specific, mostly emotional and relational areas of their life. Western Buddhist-derived thought and practice provides such tangibility through emphasizing spiritual and personal growth as a core theme, directly relating to emotional and relational questions, and teaching on the basis of specific methodologies that are rooted in observation and experience. I have contrasted this "fit" with the way in which our presentation of Christianity is not in tune with such needs, and which often alienates not only unchurched people but also young people in our churches that have similar needs when they find them better addressed in the world outside. I have analyzed this in terms of the need to move from a focus on what to a focus on how.

What can the church do to move from what to how, or, in other words, to address the needs of unchurched, spiritually searching Westerners?

Emphasize Sanctification

This may seem an odd point for those who feel that sanctification is a conservative, even repressive term that does not match well with modern audiences that want freedom from prescriptive religion. From my experience with postmodern people (including myself) however, sanctification is actually more understandable and meaningful than justification. I find that postmodern people have a profound understanding of their own brokenness. They realize their need to be changed, though they might not quite grasp the idea that they need to be forgiven. They will find more attraction in a seminar on “How to Develop Compassion” than in a lecture on “The Saving Work of Christ.” They also will feel more drawn to a church that has “heart change” as its core theme than a church that is focused on keeping traditions or guarding theological truth. In our evangelism, we should therefore focus on sanctification—on activities that help people to tangibly grow emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. The meaning of justification, and God, then, should derive its power from seeing its relevance to the journey of sanctification. How does our experience of forgiveness affect our ability to spiritually grow? Why do we need Jesus in order to become a better person? How is the gift of grace connected to success in the battle for a new heart? Et cetera.
Make Emotional Health Part of Our Identity

The physical health ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist church is a beautiful exception to what we have talked about: It is a very particular, tangible, imitable path of growth that is a proud marker of our Adventist identity. We teach people how to eat, drink, sleep, exercise, etc., in order to have a fit body. This is very relevant to unchurched people. However, we are not the only ones offering health knowledge, and body health is not the only thing people are interested in. Unchurched people find their needs met in Buddhist-inspired monasteries, lectures, and literature that deeply address both body and heart. I would like to suggest that, especially in our Western contexts, as Seventh-day Adventists we should take our holistic approach to spirituality a step further by becoming at least as intelligent, intentional, elaborate, and passionate about providing guidance in emotional health as we are about providing guidance in physical health. Could we develop and expand emotional health programs and personal growth centers as important as building clinics and hospitals? Could we supplement our evangelistic series not only with free health checkups but also with free counselling? Could we develop as much lay knowledge in our churches about psychological issues like self-confidence and drawing boundaries in relationships, as we have about body issues like nutritious foods and the negative effects of alcohol?

Develop a Church Culture of “Sharing the Journey”

Our focus on sanctification and emotional health must take place in a community setting where people are encouraged to freely share how their journey is going. I have often observed that there is a dichotomy between what we talk about in church and what we talk about or experience outside of the church. In church, we may sing and pray that we are freed from sin, that we do not fear, that we are full of joy, that we love our neighbors, etc., but outside the church, we experience nagging problems of fear, depression, and problematic relationships. I believe that our churches would become a lot more credible to unchurched Westerners if we would openly discuss what is really going on in our lives. We need a culture of witnessing that (1) does not only focus on miracles and answers to prayer but also on our journeys in building transformed characters, and (2) does not only share in a modernistic way about victories, but also shares about failures and how we deal with them. We need a culture of small, intimate groups where our real journeys can be openly, vulnerably shared. And we need exceptional leadership to guide us in such delicate processes, as we collectively discover what it means to grow up in Christ and how being Christian relates to tangible emotional, relational, and spiritual growth.
believe that only in such a context would our unchurched Western friends have a chance to discover why they would choose Christianity over any other path in order to experience a true change in their heart.

Get Tangible

Our unchurched friends need to see that Christianity is a tangible path that can be *tried*, observed, and experienced. We need to be able to provide practical answers as to what they can do to deal with specific emotional, relational, and spiritual challenges. Moreover, we need to build such answers from a prophetic, biblical perspective, and not just refer to secular sources for lack of (familiarity with) our own. Thus, rather than just saying “lean on Jesus” or using secular psychology, we must work on developing models of emotional/relational/spiritual growth that are both tangible and biblical. Only that will give us a cutting edge in the Western “market” of tools for growth that is so heavily populated by Buddhist and Buddhist-inspired thought. And only then will be do justice to Jesus Christ, the great Restorer!

Ultimately, as Christians we worship the Creator. Only the connection with our Creator will fully restore anyone. That heritage is a serious call to us to honor his power by taking our spiritual growth out of the realm of the nebulous and becoming intentional, intelligent, transparent, and tangible about it. In this way, those who are now finding their emotional and relational needs met in Buddhist meditation, horoscopes, wisdom, etc., could find their needs not less met, but *more fully* met in our communities that represent Jesus Christ, the great Restorer of humanity.

Notes

1 Buddhism is an ancient and vastly diverse religion that is adapted worldwide according to indigenous traditions and needs. For example, the type of Theravada Buddhism that is practiced by most lay people here in Thailand, where I currently live as a missionary, centers not on “reaching Enlightenment” but on gathering merit for the purpose of prosperity and power in this life and the next. Thai lay Buddhists are generally more interested in magic chants, amulets, and fortune telling than in understanding and developing their level of consciousness. Such “folk expressions” of Buddhism, mixed with animism and other Eastern religious traditions, are common around the globe. In the West, expressions of Buddhism are primarily concerned with personal growth in the realm of emotional and mental development, with more or less direct links to ‘original’ Buddhist teaching and practice. In this article I refer to these expressions as “Buddhism or Buddhism-derived thought and practice.”
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