The Interior Life

Editor’s Note: On September 26, 1998, the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas held a panel discussion on "The Interior Life" for over ninety students from Humboldt State University and the University of San Francisco. This is Dr. Ron Epstein’s talk. Talks by other panel members will be printed in future issues. Dr. Epstein is currently Research Professor at the Institute for World Religions in Berkeley and Lecturer in the Philosophy Department at San Francisco State University.

When Dharma Master Heng Shun called to invite me to speak, he didn’t tell me that I was supposed to speak on the interior life. If he had, I would have said no, because here we have so many experts on the interior life, who are real professionals. I think that’s one of the great contributions of Buddhism to the world—a kind of professional curriculum on the interior life. Although we also have explorers of the interior life in the West, I don’t think there’s the same kind of systematic dedication to that exploration as is found in ancient India and in particular, in Buddhism.

I didn’t really approach Buddhism from an academic view, and sometimes I wonder how I got involved in academic Buddhist Studies altogether. I grew up in a fairly wealthy, upper middle-class community in the Middle West, where there were—just like anywhere else—good people and bad people. But, to be fair, I think the main value of the community was money. Your status in the community had to do with how much money and what kind of material goods you had, and I think because of the good ethical values that have been instilled in me by my family, I realized that there was something rather hollow and not very satisfying about this. Unfortunately, when I was growing up, I didn’t meet any truly spiritual people from any religious tradition, and so religion for me—from what I learned from the community—was not about the spiritual nature of human beings, but it was about religious institutions and social status. Usually the people who were most revered in the churches and temples were the people who had the most money. I hope that very few of you had this experience when you were growing up.

Then I went off to college at Harvard. It was very confusing for me, because the motto of Harvard is veritas, which means truth, and I naively assumed that people at Harvard would be concerned with the truth. Probably there were some there who were concerned with the truth, but most of them were concerned with fame, power, and, to

November 1998 Vajra Bodhi Sea
a lesser extent, money. There were some very brilliant people there, and I felt awed by them. Interestingly enough, the first really spiritual person I came into contact with was a Christian. His name was Paul Tillich. He was a well-known Christian theologian in the fifties and sixties and had a tremendous amount of charisma. He would lecture every day to one or two hundred students, and I literally sat at his feet and drank in a kind of spiritual energy which I had not experienced before. I was also awed by his incredible intellect and education, which was of a scope I had never experienced before. He understood not only the whole Western tradition of philosophy and spirituality, but also something of Asian traditions. It was from him that I first learned of Buddhism. Because I had the tendency, I was interested in the interior life, although I didn’t have much interior life.

I didn’t have much interior life because I grew up in a society and an educational system that doesn’t teach us anything about the interior life. Unfortunately, most people, although they may be very good people and some of them may devote themselves to very good causes, have no interior awareness. Their attention is always focused out there in the world. To the extent that they are aware of what’s going on inside their minds, their awareness and interest lies in intellectual thoughts. It never occurs to most of them that those very thoughts are getting in the way of their own self-understanding.

When you go to college what is of value is thoughts and ideas. Your ability to remember and organize them is the basis on which you are evaluated during your university career. (I think you are lucky that at Humboldt State and at the University of San Francisco you have some professors who realize that there is something to learning beyond that.) This weekend you’re coming into contact with a tradition that says those thoughts and ideas can have some value—depending on what they are, they can guide us in our life—but if we really want to understand who we are, we have to look beyond them and realize that they cover over what is really valuable about us and about our understanding of the world.

I was in college in the early sixties, which must seem a very, very long time ago to most of you. I’m sure you’ve read in the history books that it was a rather turbulent time. Some of you may even have some rather bizarre parents from that era. My son is always telling me that all the sixties people are just weird, and he’s probably right. Anyway, when I was at college, I took a course in Asian art, and I began to realize that some of the art of Asia contains keys to an inner consciousness that is beyond ideas. By looking at the art, I could intuitively feel that there was something remarkable there.

One day during my senior year I was in my room looking at a medieval Japanese Buddha image on the wall, and I began to realize that the image was a guide to the inner consciousness. I began to realize that to the extent that I concentrated on the image, the
Distinctinction between what is inside the mind and what is outside began to break down. I saw that the distinction between what is me—subject—and what is object is phony, restricting and painful. And so I got a first taste of understanding that art could be a guide to a whole new world of inner consciousness. That’s how I first got interested in Buddhism. It had nothing to do with studying Buddhism academically. When I learned that, naturally I wanted to seek out people who had wisdom—not knowledge, but wisdom—about this pathway to the whole new world of experience, which is beyond the pain of alienation that comes from cutting ourselves off from other people and from the natural world.

To make a long story short, I came to San Francisco to study Chinese and was very fortunate to meet the founder of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, the Venerable Master Hsuan Hua. He had not put up a sign saying that he was a famous Chinese Chan Buddhist Patriarch. He was living very quietly with almost nobody around. But gradually, being around him, I began to be aware that he was somebody who was very, very different from anybody else I knew. It was a very low-key kind of thing. I began to be aware that he never did anything selfish. I began to be aware that when I looked at him, I didn’t have the same kind of, “Oh, there’s another person there, with his own agenda for me to bounce off of,” feeling that we always have when we meet another person. And I became aware that he was a very, very compassionate person. In very quiet, concrete, and unobtrusive ways, he was always trying to help—materially, emotionally, spiritually—everyone around him, without making any kind of claims for himself. As I began to sit and meditate with him, I became more and more aware of his special qualities.

The fact that he was a Buddhist was, in a sense, almost irrelevant to me. He himself always used to say that Buddhism is just a label, that Buddhism should not be called Buddhism, that Buddhism is the true heart, the true nature of the minds of all sentient beings. And so, when we study about comparative religion and make all of these categories: “I’m a Buddhist. You’re a Christian. He’s a Muslim. She’s a Jew,” there’s something very artificial about it. Those categories sometimes may have some usefulness for sincere people on their own spiritual path, but they also become a hindrance and can be counterproductive. I often feel a great sense of kinship with people who come from other spiritual traditions; I feel that we are really on the same path insofar as we can understand it. Now, whether that same path is ultimately the same, who is to say? But to all of us who realize that what is truly important about human life lies beyond our own selfish egoistic considerations, then these distinctions about doctrines, about ideas, are not so important and don’t tend to get in the way.

大四時，有一天我在房間望著牆上一幅日本中古時代的佛像時，意識到這種佛像是通往內在意識的指南針。隨著我對這幅像注意力的集中程度，我意識到我自己身心內外的分界線開始模糊起來。我們對主客二體的區別不僅虛假、礙手礙腳、而且能引起痛苦。我因此開始瞭解到藝術可以導引人進入內在的意識，一個全新的世界。我由此對佛教產生了興趣，這跟我作佛學的學問一點關係都沒有。我有了這個認識之後，很自然地就想找出那些有這方面的智慧、而不是有這方面知識的人，能在我走向一個全新的經驗的道路上導引我。這種新的經驗可以將我們由因與他人分割開，與大自然分割開而引起的這種孤立的痛苦中提拔出來。

長話短說，以後我就到舊金山來學習中文，有幸遇上了聖城的創建人——宣公上人。他沒有自詡招牌說自己是有名的中國禪宗祖師或什麼的。他靜悄悄地獨居著。但是慢慢地跟他身邊之後，我開始意識到他跟我所有認識的人都大不一樣；他很不惹人注意的。我開始發現他從來沒有為自己做過什麼打算。我又意識到當我看他的時候，我沒有那種「又碰上一個有自己主觀思想的人」的感覺。我意識到他是個非常慈悲的人。在物質上、精神上、感情上，他都是默默地，很實在地，不加為難地幫助每一個人，但卻從不居功。當我跟他在一起打坐時，我越來越意識到他的這些特殊的素質。

事實上，他是不是佛教徒對我來說幾乎沒什麼關係。上人向來說佛教只是一個名詞；佛教不應該叫佛教，因為佛教是所有有情衆生的真心、真性。所以在比較宗教學裡，我們分門別類，說：「我是佛教徒；你是基督徒；他是回教徒。」這都是人為製造出來的東西。這些分類對一些在精神領域探索很有誠心的人或許會起些作用，但也能造成障礙，對人的創造力起反作用。對來自其他精神傳統的人士，我常有種親屬感；我感到就目前我們所能明白的而言，在這條探索的道路我們是同路人。至於到最後還是不是同路，誰能說呢？但是對於我們每一個人，凡認識到我們生命中真正重要東西，是遠遠超越在我們自我的計度心之外的，則上述這些教義和思想上的差別都不重要了，對我們自是不能造成障礙了。