

Religiosity, Spiritualism and Spirituality

By Rev. Master Seikai

This summer I joined a group of people backpacking in the Sierra Nevada. There were 15 of us altogether; I learned everyone's first name without knowing their last name, a situation in which you become friends with people through a shared experience, an adventure that everyone is part of and contributes to. As it happened, the group included a woman with whom I had some conversations about religion; she had visited Mt. Shasta—a place where I lived for 22 years—and described what she witnessed in the way of spiritual activities that take place there, primarily in some spots on the side of the mountain where people congregate, play drums, dance, and generally work themselves up into various states of spiritual excitement. Meanwhile, in the town of Mt. Shasta, there exists a culture of spiritualism: selling stuff like crystals, singing gongs and bells, incense, and all sorts of other paraphernalia that is associated with the world of the spiritual; dressing up in colorful costumes and talking about races of beings from lost, sunken continents that have holed up in the interior of the mountain, a refuge from the modern world that has displaced the ancient one that they inhabited.

As monks living in the vicinity of this spiritual subculture, we really paid no attention to it all and would pretty much just shrug and laugh when visitors would ask us about what they had encountered, what we thought about it, was it real, so on and so forth. In other words, we regarded our lives and our practice in the monastery as genuine and authentic, while the stuff going on nearby seemed pretty superficial, glitzy, and not having much to do with actual spirituality as we understood it. My recent conversation brought this situation back to my mind, and I found myself telling my backpacking friend that what she saw was what I'd call spiritualism: people desperate to experience something that they could call spiritual, desperate to feel the energy of the "vortex" of Mt. Shasta—wanting to dress up and play a part in a spiritual play.

I have an Unabridged Webster's Dictionary, four inches thick, which I still sometimes refer to in preference to the computer. Webster defines religiosity as "*the quality of being religious, especially of being extremely or excessively religious*". It also uses the word *affectation* in describing religiosity, which suggests an aspect of pretentiousness in making a show of being religious. Even though I am a monk and thus by definition am a religious person, I don't think of myself as being particularly or overtly religious; I think the difference in meaning is that there are people like those I described above, who sing and dance around Mt. Shasta, who make a show of being religious, or spiritual, whilst there are others who are genuinely "spiritual" but do not make a big deal of it. It simply shows through in how they behave and relate to other people. I could have used the word religiosity to describe the kind of spiritually oriented activities that take place around Mt. Shasta.

Webster's Dictionary gives six meanings for the word spiritual. I won't copy them all out here, but they all point to the higher aspects of the human intellect, the human "spirit": that notoriously difficult-to-define aspect of being human which connects us with something greater than ourselves. Meanwhile, for the word spiritualism, there are four meanings; these include, a) *the belief that the dead survive as spirits which can communicate with the living, especially with the help of a third party, called a*

medium; and b) *the philosophical doctrine that all reality is in essence spiritual; idealism*. Finally, to complete my survey of word meanings, there are also four definitions for the word spirituality; the only one I am concerned with is the first one given: *spiritual nature, character or quality; spiritual mindedness: opposed to worldliness, sensuality*.

As a religion, Buddhism is not much concerned with the first definition I have quoted for the word spiritualism. That is not to say that no concern is shown for the dead, and indeed, there are very elaborate ceremonies done in Far East Asia for the benefit of the dead, which are Buddhist in origin, although they have also transcended being purely religious and are embraced by the culture at large. But Buddhists, especially monks, wouldn't get involved in trying to communicate with the dead. If it seems that there is some sort of lingering unhappiness, or sense of non-resolution following a person's death, a ceremony might be performed in which spiritual merit is offered to the deceased for the purpose of clearing up the lack of resolution, but that would be the extent of it.

The second meaning of the word spiritualism is pretty interesting to me because it gives a definition that is consistent with a school of philosophy that has existed within Buddhism for a very long time, under various names, including perhaps the best known one which is the Mind Only School of Buddhism. The Mind Only School originated in India, and is also known as the Yogachara School. The following quote is from about.com, an on-line service of the New York Times:

The Mahayana philosophy of Yogachara (Sanskrit, "application of yoga") teaches that the reality we think we perceive does not exist except as a process of knowing. Phenomena, anything that can be experienced, have no reality in themselves. At the same time, there is no "experiencer" who experiences except as a process of mind.

If there is no experiencer and nothing to experience, how can anything seem to be? What is it that knows? This "knowing" is explained by *alaya-vijnana*, "store consciousness," which is a function of the fifth skhanda. Very briefly, it is in this "storehouse" that mental phenomena are tied together to create the deception of external existence.

Yogachara emerged in India in the 2nd or 3d century and reached its zenith in the 4th to 6th centuries. Originally it was a rival to the philosophy of Madyamika, but eventually the two philosophies merged. Both philosophies were enormously influential in the development of Mahayana Buddhism.

This kind of philosophy leaves most people pretty cold, wondering what in the world they were talking about. In Western culture and religion, we assume that the world and everything of a material nature is real enough; our individualistic culture has been carried to outright consumerism, in which to consume and experience has been idealized, effectively replacing religious ideals. Most people simply assume that, upon death and dissolution of the body, they will be reincarnated in heaven and live there for eternity.

On the other hand, Western culture is in the process of undergoing rapid change, and part of that change is in the area of religious and spiritual values. Many of us have questioned the old religious assumptions we were raised with, looking for an explanation of the human realm and condition that

resonates with us, which does a better job of addressing the reality of dukkha—pervasive unsatisfactoriness. And we have found more satisfactory explanations and religious practices in various Eastern religions: the notion that the earth is a living entity, that humankind should live in harmony with the earth, that all component things are transient and offer no permanent or durable happiness, and that all of creation is imbued with the divine, or is indistinguishable from Mind, are all concepts that originated in Indian religious culture. And the ancient culture of India, if it is anything, is religious—or spiritual. Buddhism originated in Indian culture and developed in it, as noted above.

In Mahayana Buddhism we say with confidence that Buddha Nature permeates all of existence, and is the true nature of every human being. As such, we do not need redemption from an evil nature, for we are, from the beginning, not fallen creatures. This concept is traceable to the Mind Only ideal. But we do not need to go so far as to say that “phenomena, anything that can be experienced, have no reality in themselves”. What is reality? If there is no experiencer and nothing to experience, then what are we here for? We can look at existence from a variety of different angles and viewing points, and they will all have some validity whilst seeming to contradict other viewing points. That is the nature of philosophy. And even if it were true that all phenomena have no intrinsic reality—so what? Does that knowledge help us at all with the really difficult and challenging aspects of being human, such as dukkha, dealing with anger, accepting change, or growing old?

This leaves us facing the question of: what is truly spiritual? It is a good question to ask, the answer doesn't come easily, and not only that, we have to keep asking it of ourselves as we age, change and mature as human beings. If we look outside of ourselves for spiritual fulfillment, engaging in spiritual stuff that makes us feel good—and goodness knows feeling good is always short-lived—we will not get below the surface of true spirituality. So for starters, I would define true spirituality as the process of looking honestly at oneself and deciding to change, not just superficially, but at one's core. And then folding religiosity into the mix, I would define true religiosity as those aspects of religion which help to turn us towards what is truly important, including that which is inspirational. I have inserted the word true in front of the words spirituality and religiosity, meaning that, for me, the search for truth—or the uncovering of truth—is what I regard as the highest priority, the point of engaging in practice.

Most of what the Buddha taught was concerned with life as we all experience it from one day to the next. Human life is challenging; it is constantly changing; things are ephemeral, transient and what worked today might not work again tomorrow. Human relationships are inherently difficult. The purpose of religion is to put tools in our hands with which we can fashion ourselves into being people who show kindness to others, who are generous and forgiving, who are not prone to anger or bitterness, who take difficulty in stride and do not think that life should treat them better. Meditation is probably the most effective tool with which we fashion ourselves, but there are several others, including the practice of precepts, the practice of patience, and the cultivation of discipline and energy in one's life. Ideally, religion is not a bunch of doctrines, philosophies, moral dictates, or rigid traditional forms; but a living, breathing process of creating peace of mind and heart for ourselves and sharing that with the people around us. That is what I would call true spirituality. It doesn't come easy, and no Buddhist who really understands Buddhism will tell you that it is.

Can we be spiritual human beings without any attendant religiosity? For a start, when my colleague and I meet people who tell us that they are spiritual, our reaction is typically to suggest that, well, actually, all of us are spiritual! The question is, to what extent do you wish to explore and develop your spiritual nature? If the answer is, yes, I want to explore that part of myself which up to now has been unclear, or inaccessible, confused or whatever—then we have something to talk about. As a religion, Buddhism is like a jungle gym that kids play on: it is a framework which makes it possible to exercise and develop parts of ourselves that otherwise might not ever get any attention, and just lay dormant like an unsprouted seed in the ground.

I've known people who exuded spirituality without being particularly religious, and I've known others who presented themselves as religious but who were actually struggling to get a handle on their own spirituality. So to answer my question, I would say, no, it isn't absolutely necessary to have religiosity; having said that, however, there are many things that help us as human beings to cultivate good habits and train ourselves. We seem to need a bit of ceremonial in our lives, and praying before eating a meal is one example of a small act that reminds us of the value of gratitude (and the food). Another example is creating an altar in your house, with a statue or image with which you resonate, representing an aspect of spirituality to which you aspire and to which you make small offerings. Ceremonial—a wedding ceremony, for instance—makes a statement that we take what we are doing seriously. Life is made up of a million small moments in which we can bring care, attention and love to what we are doing—and that, to my mind, is the essence of spirituality.

On my backpacking trip I had to practice mindful walking, which is to pay attention to where I put my feet with each step; I have sprained both my ankles enough times that this is something I really need to do for myself, an act of kindness to me. I didn't twist or sprain an ankle and didn't fall over, so the trip was a success. I thoroughly enjoyed the magnificent views, the panoramas that we were able to take in as a result of laboring up mountain passes with our packs. As a metaphor for the spiritual life, a backpacking trip works pretty well: you put effort into it and pace yourself; you cooperate with the people in the group; you pay attention to where you put your feet, and you learn to appreciate the beauty of the landscape as it unfolds and changes. At the end of it there is a huge feeling of satisfaction, knowing that you have applied yourself and changed in a good way; there are no winners and no losers—everyone is working on their own inner challenges, and yet that is also done harmoniously as a group.

Years ago there were car bumper stickers that said: Visualize World Peace, a statement of a spiritual ideal. Then I spotted a bumper sticker that said: Visualize Using Your Turn Signal. I was utterly delighted, laughed out loud, and still think of that little quote, which exemplifies what I am talking about. You can make a grand gesture, which is well and good, and then you can do little things which actually make a difference in the here and now to benefit other people, such as using your turn signal. Is one more spiritual than the other? I don't know, but I do know that if we are all going to make a difference in the world, make it a better place, a less angry place, a place with less strife and fighting—that will come about as a result of applied spirituality, which is the common, everyday spirituality of bringing care and attention to the details of living and sharing this planet with all other living things.