

Struggles with Cherishing

By: Jorri Heil, Winter 2006

Tree-lined roads and brick, three-car-garage homes are outside my car window. A Rite Aid Pharmacy glows bright with a black iron fence surrounding smooth asphalt and grass that is green all winter long. I am searching for Christ Community Church in Spring Lake. A half mile past First Episcopal and a block from Saint Mary's, which is adding a two story edifice next to its already towering temple, I find the church. Christ Community has a Wal-Mart-sized parking lot. A large white cross erupts from the front of the roof and rises about four stories. The cross overlooks BMWs and various sports utility vehicles filing down the main road; a lake suffocated by a lid of snow-covered ice; and people walking their dogs on this frozen February night. At least three entrances look like main doorways to the church. I park in the lot in front of a staircase leading to eight doors—one of the small side entrances.

My entire body leans back as I pull on the oversized wood panel that opens one of the church doors. A smell, like that of soft, over-powdered skin hanging down from my grandma's face, overwhelms me. To my left, there is a congregation room the size of an amphitheater. *Buddhist Meditation Class* is printed in small, thin letters on a piece of paper taped to a podium. I follow the arrow.

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“You're a fricken retard.”

“Shut up you stupid idiot.”

Insults were shot across the dinner table with a machine gun. My mom's screams were intercepted and destroyed even before they made it into my three younger brothers' ears. My dad sat at the head of the table; he turned the volume on the television up higher to hear the six o'clock news. I added to the confusion and tension by yelling about my headache, telling my brothers to shut up, telling my mom to stop shouting. My mom finally gave up screaming but started lecturing. We should love each other. We are a family. Why do we put each other down?

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Five signs were needed to direct me to the bottom level of the church. Room after empty room in the narrow hallway ends when I reach the last doorway. The Urban Café. Fluorescent ceiling lights are off, floor lamps are dimmed, and the glow from candles dances against the purple and marigold colored walls. Three black leather couches and a few plastic chairs that look like they once surrounded a bonfire form a circle at the center of the room. Tall lamps, pillars of light that look like they are from Pier 1 Imports (contemporary, unique, cheap), are in the corners. Two black and chrome shelving units line one wall and hold *Pictionary*, *Guesstures*, books about Jesus. On a coffee table between two chairs, there is a framed Buddha drawing next to a picture of an elderly, Asian monk.

I had envisioned a room with foam floor mats used for stretching before a workout. When one of my coworkers talked about a friend of his that went to meditation classes, I became interested. I imagined the meditation to be similar to the yoga class I took and enjoyed when I was younger. Everyone would stretch, flex, and take a few deep breathes. While softly describing a peaceful setting, the limber instructor would demonstrate the positions. The eagle. The warrior. The extended lateral angle. Eager students would bend, twist, and readjust. Their

positions looked more like the wingless eagle or the wounded warrior. I thought the meditation would be the same; students trying to escape reality by controlling their minds and bodies.

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I put on my oversized, black wool pea coat—it is the only dressy winter outerwear I own. I was not sure how I should have been dressed, though. Before I walked out the door, my dad asked where I was going. “To church.” He cocked his head to the side, put his hands on his hips, and raised his brows. I knew I would get that reaction. I had never been to church, ever. Well, I went once as a child with my father’s religious siblings. Both my uncle and dad fell asleep during the service. There seemed to be no purpose. To me, God is just a Santa Clause for adults. I explained to my dad I was going to a Buddhist meditation; he should have known I would never go to a real church service. His reply: “Are they going to make you give them money? It could be a scam.”

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I introduce myself to Ron who is sitting in one of the chairs. He organizes the meditations. Every two weeks Gen Khedrub, an ordained Western Buddhist monk, comes from Chicago. In the West, Buddhism is mostly about meditation—it is not necessary to believe any of the religious elements. I was told that most of the meditation students incorporate Buddhism into their own religions. Tonight, the Dharma lesson will be played on a CD recorded from Gen’s teachings in Chicago. Dharma means protection. By practicing Buddhism, followers are protected from suffering and problems. This is done through the development of inner peace and happiness. So, even if I am living in an apartment infested with rats and have been eating Ramen Noodles for a month, Buddhism should help me achieve happiness. I am skeptical, though, that in our world today anyone could achieve the ideals that Buddhism offers. But I have tried a lot to gain happiness—spending more time with family and friends, exercising, doing things for others, doing things for myself, thinking happy thoughts—and Buddhism is just another addition to the list.

The two hour class begins with a guided breathing meditation, followed by the lesson and a discussion. The classes are from the book *Eight Steps to Happiness* by Geshe Kelsang Gyatso. The goal of the sessions is to “provide an in-depth analysis of how to train our minds in compassion and wisdom, so that we can make authentic spiritual progress and be of more benefit to others.” Wisdom I can handle. Compassion, cherishing, and benefiting others are ideas that are absent from most of society. The lesson will be more complicated than I imagined, especially because tonight’s session is “Enhancing Cherishing Love,” and I have little love to begin with.

Ron, the organizer and official leader when Gen Khedrub is not teaching, is in his mid-thirties. His jeans are faded to a dirty white color, and they have dangling threads where his heels tear at the fabric. He has square glasses, a burnt orange fleece pullover, tennis shoes, a goatee—a typical man. I was expecting a robe. As another student filters in, Ron and I discuss my assignment. Since I am a student, Ron is letting me observe and bypass the ten dollar donation. Don is the next student. He is in his sixties, bald on top with a gray beard like a bird’s nest on his face, and wanders aimlessly around the room. To the window, to the couch, back to the window, to the door. I anticipated him. When I think of Buddhists, I imagine strange misfits because of the misconceptions spread in our society. Wandering Don was just that. He probably spent hours each day meditating, dancing, chanting, honoring Buddha. His homeless look made

me think he gave up the normal American culture—hair cuts, shopping malls, television—to follow Buddhism, to embrace peace. He was a man who could meditate; I was sure.

The third student is a woman—also a first time participant. She is from Santa Fe. Her voice is soft as if she is afraid. When Ron asks her why she is in Michigan, her words shrink to a whisper. She stutters, mumbles a few sentences, and leaves her presence a mystery. Another student enters; she is in her fifties, wearing khaki colored dress pants and a sweater. She reminds me of a librarian—quiet, contemplative, educated. The last to enter is a woman in her twenties—black pants, black shirt, wavy dark brown hair, a pale face. She looks like she just ended the gothic years of her life. She must be here to compensate for the lack of compassion she had. Ron, hopeful more students will arrive, waits until a little after seven o'clock to begin. The small class is typical on CD nights, but Gen Khedrub draws a crowd of at least twenty people.

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Busy was an understatement considering the lines of customers we had at the frame shop table. It was Saturday—retail bliss day. As my coworkers and I passed each other back in the shop—where our larger framing equipment like the Wizard mat cutter, the dry mount press, and the glass scoring Fletcher 3000 are kept—we mumbled profanities. While we waited for the press to beep signaling a customer's poster was done being adhered to foam board or for the Wizard to finish cutting a mat, we bitched about the clientele. We did not care that the person's great grandpa sketched the image for his wife but stuffed it in his pocket before giving it to her; we could not repair the tears or remove the wrinkles. And the lady who is arguing that her painting is not straight in the frame is blind—a measuring tape never lies.

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Wandering Don talks about the Tai Chi classes he teaches. His voice is deep, hoarse, all knowing. Stories about his trips to Taiwan are weaved into everything he speaks about. Ron's voice breaks through the chitchat. It is time to begin. He closes the door. Wandering Don slips his shoes off; he sits cross-legged on the couch—he is ready, he knows what he is doing. Ron instructs: back straight, feet firm on the floor, palms up, one hand on top of the other, thumbs touching, eyes closed. Not mine. I am waiting for something. Levitation? Chanting? Something weird.

Ron's voice, steady and soft like water drip, drip, dripping from a leaky faucet, recites the meditation steps. He guides through each body part. Feel the muscles relax in your shoulders, biceps, chest—step by step to the feet. There are long silences; a time to feel and listen to the air—cool then warm—rush into and out of the nose. I follow along but open my eyes to watch and to keep myself from falling asleep in the calm environment. The other students' faces are relaxed, except the woman from Santa Fe; she looks worried the whole time like she will be caught and dragged back to the desert, to the mountains. Their chests rise and fall; bodies are motionless otherwise. My muscles are relaxed from the dim lighting, quiet voice, and comfortable couch—not my brain's control over me. I let my mind wander to the wind chimes beating against each other outside of the window like an uncoordinated drum line. A choir practices above the Urban Café. I should not be listening to this. Concentrate. Relax. I combine the sounds into white noise that knocks at my ears trying to enter. I focus on my toes. Ron says to bring attention to the legs, the thighs.

Suddenly, a young boy's voice, high-pitched from excitement, breaks into the room from outside of the church. A door slams shut and two sets of foot steps stomp across the floor above. My eyes dart in the direction of the interruption. Gothic girl opens one eye slowly but shuts it

fast as though not to bring her too far from her peaceful place inside. I focus. Inhale...exhale. Yes, I feel the air filling my nose, trachea, lungs. Then, Ron tells us to open our eyes and slowly leave the meditation.

Everyone sits still. Ron gets up and pushes play on a small CD player—it is the lesson. A few people keep their eyes closed. Gen Khedrub's young voice speaks. He starts talking about four ways to cherish others, which is discussed in *Eight Steps to Happiness*. Gen gives real life examples and anecdotes from his experiences. He goes on a tangent about tea and the number of people that are needed (growers, deliverers, retailers, etc.) to simply be able to make the drink in one's own kitchen. "We should cherish all living beings constantly," he says. He laughs, jokes—he is a regular guy (unlike the deep voiced man speaking about theories beyond my knowledge that I expected). Between lessons about recognizing our faults and viewing all living beings as supreme, church bells chime outside. I cannot help but feel that all living beings are not supreme. I think of the girls from high school that ridiculed me, terrorists, my dad, President George W. Bush. These are people I cannot cherish. As the lesson continues, Wandering Don's head bobs, and he opens his eyes trying to stay awake. Gothic girl's eyebrows are furrowed. Her forehead is shortened and wrinkled as she listens.

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The group project was due in a week. No one wanted to meet and none of my group members did their part. I initiated and conducted the interview, wrote the speech, prepared the visuals, and organized a time for everyone to convene. Noon on Wednesday at the computer lab in Manitou Hall—the big lab, the one by Mackinaw Hall, the lab near The Commons. We had to practice once because I was the only one who knew what the project was about. Only one person came. The others did not answer their cell phones, so I sent each of them a rude e-mail. The language was harsh and profane, and my threats about giving them failing grades on the peer evaluations were true.

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The teaching concludes and Ron shuts off the CD player. The remainder of the class is discussion. The woman from Santa Fe has droopy eyes and sagging skin like a basset hound's. She talks about how she finds too many faults with herself. Everything is a fault, which contradicts Gen's theory that it is hard to recognize our own weaknesses. I wonder if my eyes are empty like the Santa Fe woman's. I could say her words—they would be true. Ron says we need to remember to thank people for telling us our downfalls because it lets us improve ourselves. Even when he does not ask to hear his blunders, he feels thankful he is told. I do not want to know my faults. I would have to understand and change myself. But I can barely appreciate others, and I am sure if they told me what to change, I would cherish them less. Wandering Don comments about a theory from a different book. No one knows what he is mumbling about. Gothic girl speaks about work. People around her are there for a reason; they help her learn and grow into a better person. I stay quiet.

Ron shakes my hand and thanks me—again—for coming to the meditation. He invites me to the potluck where Gen will be doing a general teaching the next day and to an event in two days where the lesson will be on love versus attachment. I decline because I have to work. He says I am welcome to come again any Thursday and encourages me to attend a live teaching by Gen. I might.

I walk out to my car—to chaos. Engines hum and tires roll loudly over the pavement around me. Street lights cast shadows and lights from buildings and houses make me believe the town will never go dark. Wind tilts the naked trees and makes the few patches of grass that have

lost their blankets of snow shiver. I have left the bubble of kindness and peace to venture into the world and back home; both opposites of the meditation room. During the class, I was accepted. They understood I had faults and wanted to work together to overcome them to be better people. But outside, I am alone. No one cares about me or anyone else. If I want to change, I have to find the will to do it by myself.

The concepts from the lesson and discussion resonate in my head. At night, in bed, I want to make myself the person that was described. I want to listen to the homeless to whom I do not have money to give; I want to learn from my lazy coworkers; I want to thank those who tell me I am wrong. I feel like shit. I am shit. I am just another worthless, self-absorbed human wandering around earth. I cannot live up to the ideal person that Buddhists try to become. I cannot cherish myself, so how can I value others? But I want to go back to the class. My mind wants to know what else I have forgotten—traits such as listening instead of hearing; accepting; and cherishing. I want change. I should go to every lesson and learn everything I can about myself and others. I will change.

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We are behind. Customers are lined up and scheduled orders are not complete. The supply shipment is late. The boss is cutting hours. I find it hard to cherish customers who demand their artwork to be framed within ten minutes, with a mat color we do not have in stock, for under twenty dollars. Cherishing sounded easy. Realizing I can learn something when customers yell because their orders will not be done on time is difficult—it is impossible. Buddhists have probably lost touch with the real world, the harsh world, and they have never worked in retail. I have lost my compassion—a year of Buddhist meditations could not fix me or the people like me who are just trying to get by with some sanity left over. I am aware there is more to people—a kinder side. But experiencing the others, the rage infested people whose goals are only personal and who care about nothing more than getting into Heaven makes growth almost unattainable. A few people try to overcome disorder—like the students of the Buddhist meditation classes. But living in the chaos outside the island of meditation makes me forget about who I should be—it fills me with the hate and pain everyone else has.