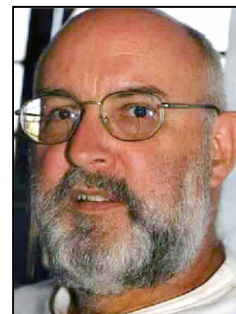


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## Dayamati - Clearness process

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This past week I underwent what is known in Quaker circles as a clearness committee. A clearness committee is a group of elders, usually chosen by the person seeking clarity on some issue, who meet with a person seeking to clarify his or her thoughts and feelings about some spiritual matter of importance. If, for example, a Friend feels led to undertake some project or pursue a course of action, but is not entirely sure whether the leading stems from an abiding conviction or a transitory whim, the Friend may request that a clearness committee be formed. It is customary for a person to seek a clearness committee when seeking membership in a particular meeting. (The only way to become a Quaker is to become a member of local meeting that has been authorized to admit new members.) The clearness committee I had this past week was to examine my request to be made of a member of the Albuquerque Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends.

My situation was complicated by the fact that I am a Dharmachari in the Western Buddhist Order and that I wish to remain one. This meant that I first had to contact my mentors in the Western Buddhist Order to determine how they would feel about my being a Quaker and whether they would see my becoming a Quaker as a repudiation of Buddhism in general or of the Western Buddhist Order in particular. The principal issue to be explored there was whether I myself experience any kind of conflict between my Buddhist convictions and practices and my Quaker convictions and practice. I do not. Asked whether I can even imagine anything coming up that would feel like a conflict in my mind, I respond that I cannot.

The next step was to meet with a Quaker clearness committee to explore whether the Albuquerque Society of Friends sees any obstacles to my being both a practicing Buddhist and a convinced Quaker. The four elders with whom I met could see none. They recommended, therefore, that my application for membership be approved by the meeting as a whole. If no one has any serious objections, their recommendation will be followed.

Both to those who know something about the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order and to those who know something about the history of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), it might come as a surprise that my intentions were approved by both organizations. Historically, the WBO has discouraged dual membership, and people have been advised to choose whether they wish to be part of the FWBO or part of some other Buddhist organization; serving two masters has not been seen as practicable. In the FWBO it has generally been assumed that it is entirely impossible to go effectively for refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha while also practicing a non-Buddhist path such as Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism or Islam. The Quakers, it is well known, were originally a Christian reform movement, deeply convinced that Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterians and Puritans had all corrupted the original teachings of Jesus Christ and had failed to follow Christ's example; their task was to return to a pure and uncorrupted form of Christianity. Being a faithful follower of Christ did not, for early Quakers, entail going for refuge to the Buddha. So one might well ask how a Quaker can be a Buddhist and how a Buddhist can be a Quaker. The answer is that things change. When people are open to change, they need not become stuck in patterns of belief and practice that were considered essential in the past.

In my own case, the Quaker meeting to which I applied for membership is part of the minority of Quakers that are universalist liberals and who feel free to draw inspiration from any and all

spiritual traditions. One is every bit as likely to hear a liberal Friend quoting the Dhammapada, Gandhi, Laozi, Rumi or Walt Whitman as to hear quotations from the Bible or George Fox or Martin Luther King, Jr. Indeed, it is not at all uncommon to hear liberal Friends confess that they never read the Bible and find the Bible off putting, confusing and counterproductive. Liberal Quakers are now a minority within the Society of Friends. The majority of Quakers are evangelical Christians with a rather aggressive missionary agenda. The largest concentration of Quakers in the world is in Kenya, a country in which American evangelical Quakers have been particularly active during the past several decades. It is close to a certainty that a Buddhist applying for membership in an evangelical Quaker meeting would be rejected.

How have liberal Quakers strayed so far from the roots of their Christocentric spiritual ancestors? The key to understanding this lies in remembering what George Fox and the first Quakers meant by being a disciple of Jesus Christ. They certainly did not mean being Biblical literalists. On the contrary, one of the most often quoted verses from the Bible in early Quaker testimony was "The spirit gives life, but letter killeth." George Fox was chided by priests and theologians of his day who pointed out that he could read neither Hebrew nor Greek. He responded by saying that all human beings participate in the "inward light," that was the spirit that gave rise to the words in written scripture. We can all gain access to the source of all scriptures if we learn to still our minds, open our hearts and listen carefully to the still small voice that guided the prophets and Jesus Christ and the desert fathers. That same still small voice has spoken to people throughout history in all parts of the world. It need not speak in the same way to all people.

If one begins with the conviction that it is possible to understand the Bible only if one first listens to the spirit that resides in all people in all places, it is a short step to realizing that it is not necessary to understand the Bible at all. All one need understand (or try to understand) is the spirit that manifests in thoughts, dreams, imagination, fantasy, creativity, prayer and meditation, that inspires poets and revolutionaries and visionaries and gives stability to elders and caution to conservatives. Yes, one might find some passages in the Bible that agree with one's voice, but one may just as well find some passages in the writings of Zhuangzi, Nagarjuna or Sangharakshita that are congruent with the leadings of the inner spirit. No scriptural tradition is privileged. No scriptural tradition, and indeed nothing that any human being has said, is without potential spiritual value. No scripture will speak to everyone. No scripture will speak to no one. No one will find no guidance from somewhere.

There is, of course, a potential danger in openness, and especially in an uncritical and naive openness. The typical human mind conjures up quite a few half-baked whims and crackpot delusions in the course of an average day. Not every dream is significant; not every fantasy is as insightful as the sermon on the mount, or the words of the Dhammapada, or the poetry of Walt Whitman. Everyone needs a good editor. A good poet is one who does not publish her poorly crafted poems. A good photographer is one who never shows his bad photographs. A good visionary is one who does not share her every wild idea.

Who is the editor who helps a free spirit sort genuine leadings of the inward light from delusional enthusiasm? That what friends are for. It is not a good idea to embark on an open-ended, open-minded, open-hearted search for truths without the companionship of carefully chosen good friends. It is perhaps no accident that the two organizations through which I ply my spiritual trade are the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) and the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). Without all these Friends, I would surely be, in the language of George Fox, "mazed in notions, gadding abroad from the truth and liable to disorderly walking."

I wish thee clarity in thy seeking.