



**Peacebuilding from the Inside Out:  
The “Work of the Soul” as a Key to Working with Others**

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### Abstract

Fields that deal with human conflict focus mainly on relations *among* people. Their results can be enhanced with a supplemental focus on the domain *within* people: the identity and values held within the deepest self, often considered the realm of spirituality and faith. Words attributed to Jesus of Nazareth summarize the connection: “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34)—i.e., the domain within us shapes our behavior in the world among us. In this *within*, contemplative spirituality—as practiced by monastics and mystics in several faith traditions for centuries—has a substantial contribution to make. Its central purpose is the “encounter with Oneness” (named in various traditions as God, the Universe, Brahman, emptiness, and so forth). Over time, asserts contemplative thought, this encounter transforms people at their very core, embedding in them the values that, according to many traditions, live at the heart of Oneness, especially compassion, gentleness, and peace. Energized by the encounter, deeply reoriented toward these values, individuals are empowered to bring them into the world. While making the points above, this paper examines the encounter with Oneness as detailed in several faith traditions, especially Christianity and Buddhism. Two areas are discussed in detail. First, the text describes a selection of widespread spiritual practices used by contemplatives to facilitate this encounter, including silent prayer, meditation (particularly *zazen*), and encounters with “sacred texts.” Second, the paper presents the idea of living in harmony with other traditions not just by respecting them, but by practicing them ourselves. Included are the experiences of both the author and a monastic organization dedicated to this approach. Throughout, the paper makes the connection between venerable spiritual practices and the enhanced capacity to make peace across divides. It also, wherever possible, rearticulates spiritual practice for a broader audience, rendering it more inclusive and accessible across belief systems.

**Keywords:** contemplation, spirituality, Christianity, Buddhism, peacebuilding, dialogue

*Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.*  
—Matthew 12:34

By definition, fields that deal with human conflict and reconciliation focus mainly on relations among people. In dialogue and deliberation, for instance, most models seek to promote the interpersonal in nearly every phase of the process: creating environments conducive to mutual exchange (Living Room Conversations, n.d.), establishing ground rules for interpersonal communication (Center for Courage & Renewal, n.d.), or developing models for brainstorming and collaboration (Stadler, n.d.; Brown & Isaacs, 2005).

There is good reason for all this. *Among* is foundational to our nature as social beings. But it is not our whole nature as human beings. We are also *within*—possessors of rich inner lives that include some of the most cherished facets of the human experience, such as ideas, values, beliefs, and above all identity. This is often referred to as the domain of mind and heart, the realm of spirituality and faith.

The dynamic between *among* and *within* can have profound reverberations in the fields of human conflict and reconciliation, as illustrated in the pithy words attributed to Jesus of Nazareth above. *Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks* is the text’s way of saying that the domain *within* us shapes our behavior in the world *among* us. Anyone with even a passing knowledge of psychology would surely resonate with this ancient aphorism.

Those of us concerned with peacebuilding can use that observation to great advantage. We can supplement our interpersonal efforts with practices designed to reorient the *within*—to turn people’s deepest selves away from hostility and defensiveness toward inner traits that build peace: compassion, curiosity, empathy, a clear sense of self and one’s own limitations, a willingness to risk, and a hunger for reconciliation. Long before conflict resolution efforts even begin, the cultivation of such character traits can enable individuals to approach any interpersonal dialogue with a clear mind and open heart. Without such character traits, participants find it too easy to revert to their instinct toward defensiveness and self-protection, and the effort is more likely to stall.

What is the nature of this reorienting? Where do we find the practices to foster it? One model comes from the realm of contemplative spirituality—often called “the work of the soul”—which includes the world’s most venerable practices of prayer, meditation, and study. Before examining this work, however, we must understand a bit more about its objective: what, or who, practitioners are reorienting to.

### **The Encounter that Transforms**

By its very nature, such an objective is difficult to describe with scientific precision. The experience of reorientation happens in the deepest recesses of mind and heart, and therefore is subjective. Moreover, because it involves the transcendent, it takes place largely beyond the boundaries of language. For evidence we are left with the testimony of numerous sages, mystics, and devotees throughout history. Fortunately, much of that evidence converges on a theme that runs through major swaths of humanity’s spiritual tradition. It can be described as the encounter with Oneness. As with so many terms in the realm of spirituality, *One* and *Oneness* are mere approximations of an existential state, and they are not without controversy. W. Haylett (video conversation, February 7, 2018) has noted a debate within Buddhism

over these terms: given the Buddhist idea of impermanence—that nothing possesses a fixed, substantive essence—it may be more accurate to assert that “we are not all *one*; we are all *none*.” Moreover, like many spiritual ideas, the concept of Oneness has been seriously diluted by its simplistic use in popular culture. Nonetheless, it appears at the heart of many world faith traditions, and the common themes shared by this Oneness and the “Noneness” of Buddhism (e.g., that everything springs from what might be called a unity) makes *One* and *Oneness*, in the author’s view, the closest we can get to a single word that covers as many traditions as possible. As we shall see, the striving toward this encounter not only crosses spiritual traditions but crops up even in the sciences.

One of Judaism’s fundamental prayers, the shema—the centerpiece of the morning and evening prayer services (Chabad-Lubavitch, n.d.b, para. 1)—begins by asserting that “G-d is our L-rd, G-d is one.” Some Judaic traditions omit the vowel from the divine name as a sign of respect and reverence. The website of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement unpacks the meaning of this core assertion:

We inhabit a cosmic mirage. We perceive myriad creations, all seemingly self-sufficient and independent beings. But, as Jews, we believe that in fact there is only one true entity. One Gd who is the essence of everything. One Gd manifest in an infinite amount of creations. Engraving this counterintuitive idea into our psyches is our greatest challenge, but key to developing a true appreciation for, and a relationship with, our Creator. (Chabad-Lubavitch, n.d.a, para. 1-2)

The concept of Oneness is hardly exclusive to Judaism. Islam similarly insists on the Oneness of God: indeed, it is built into the first of the Five Pillars, which guide all Islamic faith and practice (WhyIslam, n.d., introduction). Even the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, as polytheistic as it seems to some adherents of other traditions, insists that the essence of God is still one, albeit expressed in three persons. Buddhism takes Oneness in a different direction with the idea that everything springs from a common source, and thus each being is interdependent with all other beings.

Does the encounter with Oneness merge the seeker with the Sought? Traditions differ on this point. Traditional Islam and Christianity have asserted that the seeker always remains distinct from the Divine. Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart take a more panentheistic approach—God as inextricably interwoven with every created being (Fox, 1980). Buddhism would question the existence of the seeker as an independent entity at all; the Oneness of seeker and Sought has been the reality all along, and enlightenment simply awakens the seeker to this truth. Whatever the specific nature of the encounter, it is clear that the yearning for Oneness expresses itself in many, if not most, points on the religious spectrum.

This yearning may have a foundation in the natural world. In physics, the ongoing search for a Theory of Everything seeks “one complete and consistent set of fundamental laws of nature that explain every aspect of reality” (Hawking & Mlodinow, 2013, para. 2). In cosmology, most explanations of the Big Bang place its origins in a single point of infinite density (known as a singularity; Hawking, n.d., para. 5).

Yet perhaps even the natural world is not the ultimate “proof” of our desire for Oneness. Hawking and Mlodinow (2013) describe the “worldview” of a goldfish in its fishbowl to illustrate that “one’s concept of reality can depend on the mind of the perceiver.... According to [this idea], the world we know is constructed by the human mind employing sensory data as its raw material and is shaped by the

interpretive structure of our brain. . . . There is no way to remove the observer—us—from our perception of the world” (para. 4). Therefore, whether or not all physical reality is “objectively” one, does our drive to find it so—or at least to settle the question—reflect a yearning for Oneness in the deepest recesses of the human heart?

In short, the encounter with Oneness appears embedded in the essence of our individual selves and our species as a whole. Just as important is the effects of this encounter: when practiced over time, it reorients the practitioner to reflect the values at the heart of Oneness—values that are remarkably consistent across spiritual traditions. For Buddhists, the awakening to our interdependence naturally sparks compassion for all beings. For Christians, union with God bends our hearts to what one biblical letter calls the “fruit of the Spirit”: love, joy, peace, kindness, and gentleness, among others (Galatians 5:22-23). These are, of course, the very values that fuel approaches to peacebuilding. Energized by the encounter with Oneness, deeply reoriented toward the values of peace, individuals are empowered to bring them into the world.

If this encounter with Oneness carries so much power to effect peacebuilding, it behooves us to discover how to foster this encounter. The same traditions that revere Oneness have spawned myriad ways to do just that: to “till the soil of our souls.” While the practices described in the next section are cornerstones of two faith traditions—Zen and Christian monasticism—their application readily crosses the lines of faith and spirit.

### Practices for the Encounter

#### *Silence in Prayer*

The word prayer, like so many others, has accumulated a wide range of meanings. Adherents of various traditions might think of prayer as “saying grace” before meals, supplications for help, or expressions of thanksgiving. They might think of set prayers in an order of public worship, such as the Jummah (Friday) prayer in Islam or the Catholic Mass, or words to be said while visiting a holy site. All of these have the potential to connect practitioners with their God.

On another level, however, is prayer of few or no words—prayer whose main characteristic is silence. In centering prayer, for instance, practitioners simply sit in the presence of the Divine and use a single word, like God or love, to focus. To quote Contemplative Outreach (n.d.), the organization whose founders developed the method, “Centering Prayer emphasizes prayer as a personal relationship with God and as a movement beyond conversation with Christ to communion with Him” (para. 2).

Much older is the Jesus prayer: the simple repetition of (in some variation) “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” With its origins in the earliest centuries of Christianity, the prayer “helps us to focus our mind exclusively on God with ‘no other thought’ [emphasis original] occupying our mind but the thought of God. At this moment when our mind is totally concentrated on God, we discover a very personal and direct relationship with Him” (Orthodox Prayer, n.d., para. 2).

Notice the outcomes of these prayers, as mentioned in the quotations above. Communion. A very personal and direct relationship. They are none other than synonyms for the encounter with Oneness discussed in the previous section—the encounter that gives birth to the reorientation of heart that fosters compassion and peace. In these and other forms of contemplative prayer, including total silence, practitioners open their hearts to God, and (in their belief) God opens God’s heart to them.

On another level, in Christian practice, this encounter with Oneness forms a “surpassing attachment” to God that naturally relaxes our attachment to other phenomena, for instance the accumulation of wealth, the quest for prestige, and our deepest convictions (Backman, 2017b, para. 16-17). It is important to note that these phenomena are not bad in themselves. Few, for instance, would dispute the value of convictions: in many cases, they represent the contributions each individual can make to ongoing dialogue about humanity’s pressing concerns. But the attachment to such convictions often prevents the conviction holder from truly listening to others, particularly those with opposing perspectives, and thereby crossing divides to reach out to them. When ongoing encounters with Oneness relax that attachment, practitioners become less invested in their own views and more openhearted in their approach to others. They are better able to build peace with others because of the peace fostered in their inmost selves.

### **Meditation to Let Go**

While the practice of meditation spans many traditions, perhaps none has elaborated on it as extensively as Buddhism. Put simply, meditation is one means by which many Buddhists strive for enlightenment: an awakening to reality as it is, including such central characteristics as impermanence and (key for our purposes) non-attachment.

Like most things in Buddhism, meditation comes in many variations: insight meditation, wisdom meditation, meditation on death, heart rhythm meditation, mindfulness meditation, and so on. Many of them incorporate attention to the breath, or a focal point (like a chant or sound), or one’s immediate surroundings at that moment.

This is certainly true of one of meditation’s most widespread versions. Zazen—literally “seated meditation,” the foundation for the Soto branch of Zen Buddhism—consists of sitting in silence, using a prescribed posture, and paying complete attention to the breath. When thoughts or sensations arise, the practitioner notes them as one would note a passing boat on the horizon, and then returns attention to the breath. Many sages have elaborated on the details of zazen—instructions on the proper posture, how to breathe deeply, the necessity of studying with a Zen teacher—and they are important. But the essence is deceptively simple: sit, breathe, focus. (The word deceptively is key: zazen is much more difficult than it sounds!)

The reality to which one awakens in enlightenment includes several characteristics central to peacebuilding in the inner self. The most fundamental characteristic of this reality—in the words of Bodhidharma, the first patriarch of what became widely known as Zen—is “vast emptiness” (Wick, 2005, p. 13). Far from a nihilistic concept, emptiness in the Buddhist tradition is the ground of infinite potentiality, realized through the innumerable causes and conditions that shape all life. Since all things come about via these changing causes and conditions, it follows that all things are impermanent, continuously in flux—so continuously that it is impossible to assert the permanent existence of anything. Bodhidharma knew this impermanence even of himself: after his declaration of “vast emptiness,” he was asked (in essence), “Who are you, telling us this?” and was compelled to say, “I don’t know” (Wick, 2005, p. 13). This impermanence, in turn, recommends non-attachment as a key to the cessation of suffering which is the goal of the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths. It is folly to attach oneself obsessively to things that undergo continuous change.

That includes the convictions, opinions, fervor, and conflict that often impede mediation and peacebuilding. By embedding the truths of Buddhism into the practitioner on a visceral level—to move its wisdom from head to heart, as it were—the pursuit of enlightenment relaxes the practitioner’s attachment to all that is impermanent. The more non-attachment becomes a part of practitioners, the more they can let go the impediments to crossing divides, and the more effectively they can build peace with their adversaries.

One other effect of meditation brings another virtue into the equation. By seeing the causes and conditions that effect everything in the universe, the practitioner is awakened to the interdependence of all things. Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese monk, has said that a single piece of paper illustrates the vast web of interdependence: it contains the trees from which it was made, the sunlight and earth that helped the trees to grow, the human effort to manufacture the paper, the ideas written on it, and so forth (Hanh, 2009, p. 2). This interdependence inevitably inspires the compassion of those who live in the web and are awakened to its presence—compassion that fuels their desire for the peace and wellness of all beings.

### **The Sacred Words**

By their very nature, prayer and meditation are grounded in one specific locus: the mind and heart of the practitioner. Other practices for encountering Oneness expand the circle, incorporating communities of people present and past, via their physical presence or their written words. Included in the latter is the encounter with sacred texts.

This encounter can take several forms. Christian monasteries, for instance, make a daily practice of praying sacred texts. Because a fixed schedule prescribes the texts for any given day, monastics sometimes pray a passage that does not resonate with them or that clashes with their own perspectives. This forces the practitioner’s deepest self to encounter wisdom outside that self, day after day, instilling the awareness that one’s personal view is not the only view—and that, quite possibly, one’s view may be wrong.

Certain prayed texts shed penetrating light on what it means to be human. Since the Psalms as a whole display the full range of human emotion, their use in prayer helps adherents identify and empathize with the inner lives of others, which gives birth to empathy and compassion. This daily encounter with the other—whether God or one’s companion human beings—helps to reorient the inner self toward the other.

The study of sacred texts engenders a similar expansion of viewpoint. Here a wide array of practices come into play: theological study, linguistic analysis, Ignatian visualization, “read the Bible in a year” programs, and *lectio divina*, the slow, contemplative reading of the scriptures to hear the voice of God (Order of Carmelites, n.d.).

In study as in prayer, the sheer “otherness” of sacred texts can reorient the deepest self. Many of these texts were written in vastly different times and contexts, most of them strange to today’s readers. The literary forms, hyperbole, and symbolism are difficult to understand. The texts’ ancient assumptions often run counter to postmodern beliefs. If readers engage the texts with any spirit of curiosity and exploration, the difference between what they read and who they are can expand their worldviews exponentially. This, like meditation and the praying of sacred texts, relaxes the practitioner’s attachment

to her convictions, opinions, and fervor, because the texts expose them for what they are: one person’s worldview among billions, in a universe that dwarfs any opinion, no matter how dearly held. As with praying the texts, continual exposure to vastly different perspectives retrains the heart and mind to approach the perspectives of others more openheartedly.

One final point must be made, and it concerns the phrase sacred texts. While presenting on this topic several years ago, the author was challenged by a humanist scholar who noted that “what you describe as the benefits of sacred text, I get from reading Wordsworth.” A subsequent reading of Wordsworth supported his claim. Particularly in a multicultural, multireligious world, where reverence for everyone’s tradition is a requirement for peacebuilding, it is imperative that we broaden the definition of sacred texts as far as possible—perhaps even to include all texts, the poems of Wordsworth and prose of Ulysses as well as the Bible and Bhagavad Gita.

### **“I Accept Everything...from Within My Everything”**

Every day, people engage in the diverse forms of cooperation we call interfaith: one-on-one conversations, story circles, interfaith alliances, organizations such as the International Center for Ethno-Religious Mediation and the North American Interfaith Network, massive events like the Parliament of the World’s Religions, and so on. They provide a model for making peace interpersonally—for crossing chasms between faith traditions through dialogue, learning, and mutual understanding. The contemplative spirit provides a complementary model: delving into other traditions not only through communication, but via active participation—not just learning about other traditions but plunging into them ourselves.

This is hardly a new idea. To cite just one example, the nuns and monks of DIMMID (Dialogue Interreligious Monastique/Monastic Interreligious Dialogue) can be seen practicing it with Zen practitioners, Muslims, and others in the documentary *Strangers No More* (Helburg, Lemoine, & Hellot, 2015). Pierre-François de Béthune, a Benedictine monk who has held leadership positions in DIMMID, believes that:

if you are deeply rooted in your tradition...you don’t have to be afraid of immersing yourself in another religion. It’s not a question of compromise, saying I’ll accept this, but not that. No. I accept everything! But I accept it from [within] my everything. It’s a meeting from faith to faith. (W. Skudlarek, 2017, email correspondence to translate outtake from Helburg, Lemoine, & Hellot, 2015)

The author’s recent experience with zazen has yielded several insights into the ways interfaith immersion can promote interfaith harmony (Backman, 2017a, p. 71). First, even a small amount of practice opens one’s eyes to the beauty and truth inherent in the “adopted tradition.” Practitioners can intellectually appreciate the value of mindfulness, for instance, but not experience the sheer aliveness of the present moment until they immerse themselves in mindfulness meditation. It is very difficult to hate a faith tradition that one has experienced firsthand as beautiful.

Second, as a corollary to this insight, the intimate experience of another faith tradition destroys the fears and stereotypes that often surround the “other.” By entering in, practitioners come to know the practice personally, discover its strengths and nuances, and find common ground with their own traditions.

It is analogous to the convening of diverse groups, such as white people and African Americans, gay and straight people, or conservatives and progressives. Stereotypes about a group tend to fall away when one is face-to-face with the uniqueness of individuals within that group. Similarly, misapprehensions of another tradition can hardly stand up under the discoveries made when one enters that tradition.

Third, it is difficult to hate a tradition when it produces transformative change. Nearly every spiritual tradition orients itself—and, via practice, its adherents—toward goodness, truth, and compassion. Entering deeply into another tradition, therefore, exposes the seeker to the transformative power therein. Backman (2017b, pp. 71-72) has noted how the practice of *zazen*, with the deep grasp of impermanence it instills, equipped him to successfully grieve the loss of a loved one in a way his own tradition could not do.

### Suggestions for Further Research

To date, the author’s work in this area has drawn on several principal sources: his twenty-five years’ firsthand experience with monastic practices, the biographies of saints and sages, and immersion in monastic and mystical literature, both ancient and modern. Scholars could expand the scope of this work in at least two directions. First, there is a need for gathering the stories of contemporary seekers who have encountered Oneness, experienced the resulting inner transformation, and lived out of it to build peace in the world. Such an investigation might naturally start with monastics from several traditions, whose entire lives are dedicated to this dynamic. A cornerstone of Benedictine monasticism, for instance, is the very “conversion of life” that this paper calls “inner transformation,” so the stories of Benedictine nuns and monks could prove fertile ground for further research.

Second, work on this topic needs expansion into other spiritual traditions. Scholars could investigate the expression of the encounter-transformation dynamic in Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam, among other faiths. Such research would make the dynamic accessible to many more practitioners by pointing toward a way that is consistent with their home traditions.

The stories of transformation accumulated to date justify the investment of time and effort that further investigation would entail. All by itself, the life of St. Francis of Assisi—whose “conversion of life” to radical monastic discipleship ultimately led him to seek peace across faith traditions with the Sultan of Egypt during the Fifth Crusade (Moses, 2009)—stands as a model for what is possible when inner transformation fuels outward peacebuilding. The existence of many such stories, whether the author’s own experience or that of everyday monks, nuns, and laypeople, holds a glimmer of promise for a way forward in building peace across divides.

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