

WHO CAN STOP THE WIND?



MONASTIC INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE SERIES

# Who Can Stop the Wind?

*Travels in the Borderland  
Between East and West*

Notto R. Thelle

Translated by Brian McNeil



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*Dedicated to the memory of the Socratic Buddhist,  
Keiji Nishitani (1900–1990)*

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## Faith in the Border Zone

In this book, the “borderland” is the place where faith meets faith. Faith tends to be formed and lived out in a world with safe borders: we know the landscape, we know the proper place for everything. Faith’s travels can indeed lead us to new panoramas and depths we ourselves had not imagined; but others have been there before us and have registered these sites in faith’s cartography. It is good to be here.

But some people leave home, cross the borders, and travel in a new landscape—perhaps because they are unhappy and long to get away, perhaps because they are adventurous and curious. Others leave home because they have received a commission, or think they have.

Those who cross the borders and live in the border zone where faith meets faith quickly discover that their world changes. The landscape is unknown, and the local language is different. New friends share their experiences and their insights into life. The world becomes larger. But that is not all. The landscape of one’s own faith looks different, when seen from the perspective of the border zone. Something hard to define happens en route.

This book attempts to share thoughts and experiences generated by my encounter with the religious traditions of the East. I crossed the borders because I had a commission: I was to invite others to take the path of my own faith and to see if it was indeed possible to take this path in other landscapes. This commission led to a fresh orientation as I traveled along new paths in an unknown country.

I lived in the border zone for sixteen years, in close contact with Japanese Buddhism and other religions. For most of this period, I worked at the ecumenical Center for the Study of Japanese Religions in Kyoto. My task was not only to study religion as an academic discipline but also to come into contact with the *life* behind the external forms, rituals, and dogmas. I was challenged to reflect on whether Christianity had any message for people who traveled along other paths. I made new friends who drew on sources of which I knew nothing, and I asked myself whether these had any connection with my own sources. I was forced to reflect on how faith could be lived in the border zone—for that was precisely where I and many others were! How could one be faithful to Christ while at the same time preserving the rich cultural traditions that had been formed by other religions? It was a unique privilege to work in the missionary tradition elaborated by Karl Ludvig Reichelt, the Norwegian missionary who did pioneering work among East Asian Buddhists: we were expected to encounter other religions and cultures with an unreserved openness and empathy, and our task was not only to preach the truth but also to search for the truth. In this way, I became a kind of pilgrim. I could not reproduce a world of faith that would be a perfect copy of my own landscape back home. Nor could I retreat to a safe distance on my own side of the border, shouting across to the members of other religions on the far side.

I had to set out on my travels in the border zone. I followed my Buddhist friends into their world. I took off my shoes—like Moses before the burning bush—because I stood on holy ground. Sometimes I discovered that the ground was very far from holy, but that was no reason to abandon my desire to let my friends take me into their own “holy of holies.”

My faith bears the marks of my travels in the border zone. My friends made profound impressions on my way of thinking. They shared their wisdom with me and showed me their dreams; they led me to sources I did not know and gave me new visions. Some of these friends, named or unnamed, have their places in the story I shall tell here. They taught me something about the gift of friendship.

Occasionally, my travels brought me out into the borderlands of belief itself, and I began to wonder if I might not be crossing over into a region without faith. At the same time, however, the whole journey was a journey inward, into faith. Sometimes, in my fumbling attempts to see more clearly the contours of the mystery that is glimpsed only dimly as in a mirror, I failed to find what I sought—God hid himself in clouds and darkness. But there were also lightning flashes of insight, in which I saw fragments of a divine reality so intensely alive that I will always continue to seek to see God more clearly.

I am no stranger to inner conflict. On the one hand, I have a message to communicate; I am meant to guide people and give them the right answers. On the other hand, I too am one who searches. What does one do when the trails disappear and the answers remain hidden? Sometimes my Buddhist friends gave me answers that were truer than those of my Christian brothers and sisters. Sometimes my explanations were meaningless, because they offered answers to questions that no one had put; I had to lay them aside and try to formulate questions that were meaningful for both sides in the dialogue.

I am also familiar with fear. I have dreamed that I was running naked along the streets, searching for a place to hide—or that I stood in the pulpit in my underwear, trying to get hold of the manuscript of a sermon without a proper conclusion. I am afraid of being exposed, of being weighed and found wanting.

I have met people who saw through the half-heartedness and emptiness in my life, and that experience is always humiliating and hurtful—and yet, because they believed in me and were able to coax forth something better in me, such encounters gave me fresh courage. I am convinced that that is how God works, and this encourages me to write.

I am not one of those who looks for authoritative answers undergirded by a felicitous concordance between theology and reason. Behind all our explanations and answers, there await other questions and new puzzles. My own relation to truth is intuitive: truth comes to me like a quivering joy when I suddenly *know*, beyond any possibility of refutation, that I am in touch

with Reality. It is as if I recognize something that I had always known, but not yet consciously discovered. True questions have given me greater joy than intelligent answers, for the questions open up a vista of new landscapes, whereas the answers seldom live up to what they promise—especially so, when they claim to be definitive. Instead of solving our puzzles, answers can close the doors, leaving us to wander helplessly down futile labyrinths.

Those who are looking for a tidy synthesis and unambiguous conclusions about what happens to faith in the border zone may be disappointed, and some will say that this book consists of fragments and loose ends. And perhaps they are right! But they would have misunderstood me if they refuse to trust me and ask whether I really am a believer at all. Most of what we say about God consists of fragments of a reality that cannot be grasped in our concepts. And I am aware that even the most apparently orthodox façades can often conceal an abyss of confusion and suppressed doubts.

Often, we fail to see the larger pattern. Life is made up of fragments—something we are permitted to understand in intense moments of clarity. But these rare glimpses of the larger coherence are possible only because we sense that the fragments too contain a pattern and a meaning.

The short chapters in this book could perhaps be read as letters from the border zone. Most of them are in fact love letters, reflections that share my experience of leaving home and of longing, of paths and of travels, and of the homeward path.

Confidence or trust is not a quality we “possess”—it comes into being when we choose to trust another person. This book is written in the trust that the reader will accept my invitation to accompany me into the border zone.



## Setting Out on the Journey

*One who crosses geographical borders  
has in fact taken only the first step  
on the journey away from well-known, safe surroundings.*

*The great departure takes place  
when our own world is challenged,  
when the internal borders are opened  
and we undertake a new orientation  
in a larger universe.*

*Abraham set out from his country  
and began his travels out into the unknown,  
to the country God had promised him.  
It is not for nothing that he received the name  
“father in faith.”*

*His faith was shaped by his journey.  
He met the Lord in the unknown.*

*"Tabi" means journey or wandering;  
it is a theme popular among pilgrims and poets.*



TABI

*"Who can stop the wind?"  
(Kobo Daishi)*

*"The wind blows where it chooses,  
and you hear the sound of it,  
but you do not know where it comes from  
or where it goes."  
(John 3:8)*

## Who Can Stop the Wind?

When Kobo Daishi (774–835), one of the great masters in Japanese intellectual history, renounced the power and luxury of the court and its bureaucracy and set out on his wanderings as a homeless monk, his family and friends thought he had gone mad and they protested loudly. His reply was simple: “Who can shatter my resolve? Who can stop the wind?” These words were more than just an appropriate metaphor for an irrevocable choice—they described a whole way of life. Kobo Daishi was whirled up out of the secure framework of his life, and he let himself be carried along by the wind. He had seen all too clearly the emptiness of the “good life” and he knew that he could find a more authentic life only if he encountered reality without any protective clothing. He could perhaps have drowned out this call and shut out the wind, but he knew that it would just keep on blowing. As a man of the spirit, he had no other choice.

When Jesus talked with Nicodemus late one night about being born anew, he too pointed to the wind: “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). Here, “wind” and “Spirit” are translations of the same Greek word, *pneuma*. The wind blows where it chooses. The Spirit blows where it chooses.

When I was a child, I ran around on a mountain outside Hong Kong, Tao Fong Shan, “The mountain of the Dao-wind.” The Dao-wind is the Logos-wind of John’s gospel, the “wind of the Word” or “Spirit of truth.” Buddhist pilgrims came to this mountain, as did others in search of the truth. Buddhist tradition called these people *yun-shui* (*unsui* in Japanese), “cloud-water.” They were wanderers who let themselves be driven by wind and water until they met a master who could lead them to the truth, one who spoke to their hearts and opened their eyes.

When Elijah waited on Horeb, the mountain of God, the first thing he encountered was a storm that split the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces, but God was not in the storm. Nor was

God in the earthquake or the fire. God came in the sound of a gentle breeze (1 Kgs 19:11-13).

It is impossible to halt the Spirit of truth, the Logos-wind. We can indeed attempt to shut it out, building walls and defense-works. We can drown it out with words—our own excuses and the warnings of our friends. But when our words and the admonitions of our friends fall silent, we still hear it blowing. It breathes life into words of Scripture that we had not yet discovered; it flickers through our dreams and takes us by surprise at unguarded moments. Sometimes it puffs away the mist of our words and in a moment's frightened clarity we know that we must follow it, even though we do not know where it is going.

We have, of course, good reasons to shut out the wind. There are so many winds and so many voices that entice us with their promises about the spiritual life and about fair spring weather, but most winds are deceitful—they die down as soon as one tries to follow them. Other winds turn into storms and we are “tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph 4:14) until we are left windswept, exhausted, and empty.

But some of this fear is unjustified. We are afraid of what we do not know. Some people are afraid that they may be led into faith—they are modern and secularized and have become accustomed to look on the church and Christianity with contempt. Others are afraid that they may lose their faith—they do not want to risk being blown away from a childhood faith in which they no longer really believe and being led into a more adult faith and insight that they do not yet know.

We know it is the Spirit of truth who is blowing into our lives, but we resist it. Yet in our heart of hearts we know that no one can stop the wind. It does not let go of us as easily as the false winds—it keeps on blowing. Surely we are not going to let fear of the unknown prevent us from following it on its path. Who can stop the wind?

## Faith's Companion

Why is it so difficult to make doubt faith's companion? Instead of meeting it face-to-face and welcoming it as our traveling companion—a companion that tests the genuineness of our faith—we make it an outlaw, and it roams around as an unseen menace, sneaking in like an anxious foreboding in the blood or an infectious sickness in our innermost heart.

You wake up one morning and are aware that someone has been there, leaving behind traces. But you dare not admit that your guest in the unprotected hours of the night was doubt. All you sense is fear—fear lest doubt might tell you that you have set your hopes on something that never became wholly real in your life.

But there is another fear too, a fear that leads you one day to open the door just a little and let doubt come in. This is the fear of inauthenticity.

In the obscure riddles of your dreams, you have already tried many times to tell your heart of your distress. The earth on which you stand is cracking up, and the convulsions are so violent that there is no safe place for your feet. You go from room to room in your childhood home and try to set fire to the furniture. You are on a ship tossed by the waves, and you are terrified of the unknown forces that pull you downward.

One day, you open your eyes and know with perfect clarity that you cannot go on concealing the truth from yourself: you are drifting, and you do not know what is happening to all that "faith" of yours.

Many veils had to be whisked aside before you yourself understood what was happening, before you grasped that you might perhaps be on a course heading directly toward unbelief. What will people say? What will your friends think, or your father and mother? Perhaps you utter a silent prayer that your faith may hold out at least until your father and mother are dead, so that they will be spared the grief and disappointment.

But once you have set the door ajar and taken the risk of this frightening encounter with doubt, the truth knows no quarter—and now you are in the eye of the storm.

As a child, I never tired of hearing my father's dramatic stories about typhoons over Hong Kong. Every time, we were astonished by the strange interplay between the forces of nature and the ten-thousand-tonners. The vessels that cut their moorings and put out to sea, into the teeth of the storm, survived; but some of the boats that remained in harbor, attached to their anchor chains and their moorings, were left as rows of wrecks along the harbor wall.

Sometimes, God calls people to go out into the storm, where they must sink or swim—better to capsize with honor than to be hurled against the harbor wall and crushed!

Now the storm rages over you. But after you have been whirled around by unknown forces for some time, life takes on a new meaning. Precisely at the point where you fear that the powers of chaos would suck you down into the depths, you realize something of which you had never before been completely certain: you believe.

In reality, these words are misleading, since doubt does not assail us like a squall of wind from outside ourselves. All you have done is to open a door to some of the abysses within yourself and unleashed these mighty forces. You are a helpless collaborator in their work of destruction. And then the miracle takes place, just as on the first day of the creation: out of chaos, newly created life is born.

### **Faith as Fate and as Choice**

Many years ago, in the late 1950s, one of the pioneers of the Norwegian Humanist Association held lectures on the nature of religion in the cathedral high school in Oslo. The sham of Christianity's claims had been unmasked, and the debate was in full swing. He concluded one of his talks with these strong words: "If you had been born in China, you would not have been a Christian. You would have been a Buddhist or a Daoist or a Confucian!" These words really struck home! Those of us who were members of the school's Christian union exchanged alarmed glances as we sat sweating on our chairs.

I was the next to address the public, and I held the shortest—and most successful—speech of my life: “Well, as a matter of fact, I was born in China.” Everyone knew that I was the chairman of the Christian union, and the whole assembly hall burst out laughing. Every subsequent contribution to the debate was completely irrelevant; the evening was a defeat for the humanists. All their arguments faded in view of the irony of fate that had made me the living proof of the error in their thinking.

But although the humanist’s words were drowned out by laughter that evening, this naturally did not mean that his questions had been answered. I do in fact suspect that his question was primarily rhetorical; he wanted to weaken our confidence in *all* religions, rather than to challenge us to be open to the knowledge offered by other religions than our own. Nevertheless, let us put the best construction on his words. He was challenging us not to take our inherited religion for granted. He wanted to sow doubt about faith as a “fate.” The historical accident that one was born in a “Christian” country is no guarantee of the truth of Christianity.

My thoughts have often returned to that debate. In the first place, it taught me that “victory” and “defeat” in debates are not always decided by a neutral evaluation of the arguments put forward and of the respective weight of the positions held by the debaters; the outcome is just as much dependent on the speakers’ elegant language and ability to formulate their thoughts, on their wit and irony, on the impact made by their personalities, or on coincidences such as the one I have just described. And second, of course, I subsequently had to admit that the speaker was right: if you are born in the East, it is highly improbable, statistically speaking, that you will be a Christian. Religious adherence is largely determined by geography.

This is a very simple fact that need not unsettle our faith. On the contrary, it can force us to think through our faith, and it can whittle away ingrained but superficial ideas that take the superiority of Christianity for granted.

When I returned to the Far East, where I had spent my childhood, I felt the magnetic attraction of the local religions. In such

a situation, faith could never be just a matter of course. Here in Europe, however, the situation has changed, since it is no longer exclusively the humanists or atheists who issue challenges to our faith. Buddhists and Muslims and adherents of other religions are active in all Western societies, and they are beginning to change the face of Europe.

An English friend told me recently that of the two hundred thousand citizens in his hometown, fifty thousand are now Muslims or Hindus. There are not so many in a country like Norway, but they are certainly a visible presence. We ought perhaps to get accustomed to the idea that a monopoly on *Weltanschauung* no longer exists: there is no longer one majority religion. Rather, societal development means that a plurality of worldviews and religions is now normal.

The sociologist Peter Berger has analyzed this transformation in modern Western societies. In the past, religion was determined by one's "fate" in the sense of one's historical and geographical circumstances. Today, the world into which we are born obliges us to choose in the sphere of faith, and Berger speaks in this context of the "heretical imperative" (from the Greek *hairein*, "to choose"). The plurality of religions and worldviews forces us to set out on our own journey and choose afresh. In modern Western societies, it is just as likely that one will abandon Christianity as that one will discover a living faith. Indeed, it is possible that an acuter sensitivity is required, if one is to choose faith rather than to drift away from it.

We can therefore take the argument put forward by the humanist in my high school in the 1950s and reformulate it as a challenge to new generations not to take inherited attitudes for granted. For example, we could say: "If you had been born in Africa, you might have been a Christian! The fact you were born in a country that is in the process of forgetting its inherited faith does not permit you to presume that Christianity does not lead to a truer and more integrated life."

## The Death and Resurrection of Our Words

During my time at high school, I was fascinated by Ibsen's description of the emperor Julian the Apostate in his play *Emperor and Galilean*. The young ruler is portrayed as a zealous witness to the faith who seeks to defeat the old religion by undermining it from within. He wanted to conquer the teachers of pagan wisdom by sitting at their feet, following them into their own world, and wresting the weapons from their grasp:

Wrestling with the lions! . . . It is God's will that I should seek out Libanios [the teacher of wisdom]—worm from him his arts and his learning—strike the unbelievers with their own weapons—strike, strike like Paul—conquer like Paul in the cause of the Lord!

I myself had been interested in Buddhism for many years. The Norwegian missionary Karl Ludvig Reichelt did pioneering work in establishing a new attitude toward the religions of the Far East. He saw Buddhists as searchers for the truth and friends on the "path" (Dao). He entered fully into their world, adopted their way of living, and admired their ideals. He was convinced that the deepest ideas and expectations in Buddhism pointed to Christ, and he believed that his vocation was to lead Buddhists "on internal paths" to him who was the Way and the Life.

Reichelt's visions became an integral dimension of my dreams. Like the young prince Julian, I wanted to enter the world of Buddhist wisdom, wrest their skill and learning from them, and "strike them down" with their own weapons. In my youthful zeal, I did not reflect all that much on the historical fact that it was Julian himself who was conquered by the pagan wisdom and became "the Apostate."

It was a shock to discover that I was completely unprepared for my encounter with Buddhism. It is, of course, true that there is a lot of watered-down piety in Japan, a Buddhism based only on customs and superstition—if you want to write about "the darkness of paganism," there are rich materials on which to draw! But if you possess eyes and ears, you gradually also

discover depths of faith and religious experience that not only present a *positive* challenge to your faith but also amount to an *onslaught* on it.

When I arrived in Japan, I brought with me much of the best in Norwegian Christian life. I had grown up in the strict tradition of the church's pietism, which was, nevertheless, fairly generous and tolerant. My own home had been permeated by a genuine faith and commitment to missionary work. I went to Sunday school and attended services in the local church. A number of years of intense activity in the Christian union in my school were complemented by perspectives from the Student Christian Federation which *was* open to a broader cultural inspiration. This was followed by solid theological studies, accompanied by the usual crises—doubt, uncertainty, and finally clarity.

Like most students, however, I was “unfinished” and immature when I left the theological faculty. I was able to expound Scripture, I was familiar with the church's history and teaching, I had a basic theological training, and I was capable of developing all of these resources. I also possessed a number of weapons with which to respond to objections and criticism. But I still had a long way to go.

I quickly discovered that my Norwegian background had not equipped me to encounter Buddhism in a meaningful way. It was not that I lacked theological knowledge; as a matter of fact, I knew quite a lot about Buddhism, and further studies would deepen this knowledge. What was missing was the dimension of *depth* in my faith, something that would be capable of encountering what Rudolf Otto has called the “almost incomprehensible experiential world” of Mahayana Buddhism.

The only way forward was to set out on my travels, seeking to penetrate more deeply into Buddhism, hearing the meaning that lay behind the words, and grasping the life behind the outward forms. I sought closer contact through conversations and studies. I have had overwhelming experiences both in spiritual dialogues with Buddhist friends and in simply being present in silence while they *worshipped*. From time to time, I myself took part in meditation under Buddhist masters.

I shall never forget my first meeting with a Zen master in Kyoto.

"Why have you come here?" he asked. "You Christians too have meditation and prayer!"

I answered that we did indeed possess these things, but that I wanted to see Buddhism from within; and Buddhism surely had something to teach us Christians too.

"But why on earth are you so keen to learn about Buddhism—or indeed about Christianity?"

I must admit that I no longer felt quite so self-assured . . .

"It is raining outside tonight," continued the master.

We sat in silence and listened. The rain fell gently on the moss and herbs in the monastery garden. Then, suddenly, there came the impossible question:

"Is it Buddhism or Christianity that is raining?"

My thoughts darted around in the silence. But the rain gave me no answer.

"It is quite simply raining," he observed. "This is a question of *being*. All your theoretical thoughts about Buddhism and Christianity are separating you from the simple and fundamental matter: *to be*."

This was the first time it dawned on me that faith could separate me from life, or rather, that speculations and pious explanations could build walls that shut out reality. Perhaps my faith would have to be demolished if I was to become a true Christian? And if the encounter with Christ did not help me *to be* in a way that was true, had I in fact encountered him?

One day, the master told me how I should enter the hall of meditation: "When you go into the hall, you must lay aside all your thoughts and ideas and concepts. Leave your theology behind you. Forget God!"

I pondered these words. Is this possible? And is it right? Eventually, I concluded that this paradoxical action could be profoundly Christian. A Buddhist too must lay aside all his ideas—about Buddha, about enlightenment, about the path to salvation. He must (as it were) abandon Buddha at the entrance to the meditation hall. But the first thing he does on entering

is to bow reverently before the statue of Buddha in the hall: he must forget Buddha, but Buddha is there. A Christian must lay aside all his theology and bid God farewell outside the meditation hall. But God is there when one enters—as near to us as our own breathing and heartbeat.

This master had studied the Bible, and one day he put me to the test:

“The Sermon on the Mount says that we are not to worry about tomorrow. What does that really mean?”

Innocently, I began to tell him about God’s loving care for us. He is our father, and we are the children he looks after.

“I know that,” he interrupted. “But what does it mean?”

I attempted to express myself more clearly: “We believe in God’s providence. We have nothing to fear. Jesus compared this to the lilies in the field and the birds of heaven . . .”

Again he interrupted me: “Yes, I know all that, but what does it mean?”

Gently but ruthlessly, the surface of all my explanations was peeled back to reveal mere theology, theories, and empty words. He was not interested in explanations, but in the reality itself. How could I express without words the Christian’s lack of worry?

Suddenly, I recalled the first Christian testimony I had ever made. I was about fourteen years old and assistant leader of a patrol in the boy scouts. My older brother was in high school and had begun to master the pious vocabulary, since he was an active member of the school’s Christian union.

“It isn’t difficult at all,” he said. “Just read a verse of Scripture and say a few words.”

I believed him and selected a verse that I liked and read it to the patrol: “Consider the lilies of the field. Look at the birds of the air. Do not worry about tomorrow.” Now I was supposed to say something, but the words would not come. All I managed was a helpless mumbling, to the effect that: “Um . . . the Bible says . . . ah . . . that we are not to get worried . . . that means . . . um . . . ah . . . I think . . .” I had fallen victim to a pious deception on the part of my brother! I was not much more than

a child, but I was expected to be an adult and to represent God: "It's easy, just say a few words."

And once again, now in the Zen temple in Japan, I experienced the collapse of my words. But this time, it was not just the pitiful and embarrassing experience of a fourteen-year-old. What was at stake was nothing less than my Christian faith!

In the course of many years of study, I had learned how to use words and concepts and to combine them to form a theological whole. This house had a beautiful façade, but its furnishings were borrowed from others—from my childhood home, from churches and meeting-houses, from theological libraries and lecture halls, or from books. I had built a house for others, but only a part of me lived in it. How incredibly naïve to believe that I could bear witness to this Buddhist master about the Christian's lack of worry and about God's fatherly care! He saw through me. He knew that I was uttering words that were fully alive only in my brain, and to some extent in my heart—but they did not live at all in my kidneys and intestines and heartbeat and respiration! Nevertheless, it was good to experience this, since the master did not intend to expose either me or my Christian faith. All he wanted to do was to scrape away the hollow explanations and pious words in order to get into the very marrow and uncover the naked heart.

In Zen, words must collapse if we are to encounter reality. This is a painful process, because it opens the door to fear and despair. Zen speaks of "the great doubt" and "the great death"; it is only after these that "the great faith" comes. Some Buddhists whom I have met believe that this is the same as "the dark night of the soul" in the writings of St. John of the Cross. After you have experienced the crumbling and disintegration of your words, you can no longer frolic in words and figures of speech with the same superficial enthusiasm. And you become attuned to the silent dimension of faith.

Buddhism too is full of words. The collection of its sacred writings in Chinese runs to one hundred enormous volumes, and it is impossible for any one person to get an overview of all this material. The foundations here are the narratives of the

Buddha's life, but there are so many versions and legends and apocryphal stories that it is not easy to identify the historical kernel. In addition, there are philosophical speculations and discussions, commentaries on these texts, and an endless series of commentaries on the commentaries. There are also guidelines for ethical conduct and guides to meditation and spiritual exercises.

Despite all these written documents, Buddhism remains unshakably aware that what *really* matters cannot be said in words. "Buddha proclaimed his teaching for fifty years, but never said one single word," it is claimed; we are told of Buddha's "thunderous silence" when he refused to answer those who were curious about the reality that lies beyond the realm of sense perceptions. Buddha did not teach a knowledge that is primarily accessible to the intellect. He taught a truth that can be grasped only in an illumination that breaks through all barriers and transforms the person's life. Daoist wisdom makes the point with exaggerated emphasis: "The one who knows does not speak. The one who speaks does not know." In the words of D. T. Suzuki, the great missionary of Zen Buddhism in the West, "The crux is how to communicate the silence without abandoning it." He himself wrote tens of thousands of pages about Zen, but he never forgot that, on the deepest level, all this was merely beating about the bush.

The most beautiful expression of this insight is the narrative of how Buddha found the one who would bring "the light of the teaching" to others. One day, Buddha sat in front of his disciples, lifted up a lotus blossom and spun it round silently in his fingers. They all waited eagerly for the message he would give them; only Maha-Kashapa smiled at this revelation, for he had grasped the wordless truth that lies beyond all doctrinal propositions and traditions. And it was he who received the commission to bring the light to others.

As a Christian, I believe in the Word. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:1, 14). I read God's Word and preach the Word. I believe that,

for all their poverty, human words can express divine things that shatter the narrow frameworks of our words. But the Word who was in the beginning, Christ who is the heart and the true meaning of God's love and wisdom, did not come to us as a *word*: the Word became *flesh and blood*. The Word did not come as theories and explanations and abstractions: the Word was a child in a manger, one human being among others. He healed the sick, proclaimed freedom to captives, ate with sinners, gave the poor a new dignity, died on a cross, and rose again from the dead. He told parables and stories. He laughed and cried. He shook his fist against hypocrisy, and he danced with children. His "kingdom of God" was no theory, but a new reality that came into being among the people he encountered.

Jesus' disciples followed the tradition he had begun. They proclaimed God's love by telling about what Jesus had done. In this way, the early church continued a Jewish biblical tradition: just as Israel had borne witness to God's greatness by telling the story of how they were liberated from the house of slavery in Egypt and entered the Promised Land, the Christians told about God's love by relating the story of Jesus. The gospels were not written as texts to be interpreted and expounded by preachers and scholars: they are *themselves* the message about God's deeds. In their utterly simple stories of deeds and events, in symbols and images and parables, the gospels reveal how God is.

In our Norwegian Lutheran church, many people have seen that the *Word* has been transformed into *words*—the "church of the Word" became a church that produces huge quantities of words. Sometimes we speak as if we knew everything about God. We describe God's being and his characteristics. Theologians walk a tightrope between various heresies when they seek to define the Trinity or analyze the two natures of Christ. Priests and preachers speak of "God's will," though others can discern only a struggle for power, an opinionated insistence on the correctness of one's own positions and personal ambitions. Carl Gustav Jung once observed that theologians talk about God in a "shameless" manner, and I believe that there is a similar bashfulness deep in the souls of our own people when it is a

question of the things of God. We theologians employ too many words; we “know” too much.

I am not saying that words are meaningless. Language is a wonderful instrument that can point to a reality beyond the boundaries of words. But it is too easy for us to succumb to a superstition about words and concepts, forgetting that there is indeed an *unutterable* dimension that lies beyond all our words. The mystery is situated between the *word* and that which is *un-said*. It cannot be contained within our systems, it can only be praised in stuttering human words. If we are too keen to analyze it and define it, it crumbles away between our fingers.

The true problem for the Christian church is not that our words are crumbling into dust, but that our innumerable words are choking and killing the mystery. Perhaps it is the grace of God that lets our words die in order that we may seek that which is real.

It is, of course, true that some people find that their faith crumbles away when words lose their meaning, but often this indicates that their faith had already disintegrated; it was merely held together by a tight corset of words and formulae. Many people experience the exact opposite, namely, that although the words may die, the mystery itself lives. Indeed, both occur simultaneously: the words crumble away and the mystery is revealed in a new clarity. And subsequently, there is a profound joy when the words rise up from the dead! This resurrection of our words need not mean that it is easy for us to find the words we seek; our words may perhaps become fewer than before. Now that we are more attuned to the mystery, we know that no words can explain it—all they can do is point to it.

Among the things I found most fascinating in my encounter with Japanese culture were the simple black and white brush drawings. A few strokes of the brush created a full picture, lacking nothing—a flower, a reed, or bamboo—simple, yet vibrantly alive. The picture is created not only by the strokes of the brush but also by the untouched white surfaces of the paper.

When we describe our faith, we often want to fill out every last detail of the picture. Perhaps we ought to take the risk of

simplicity: a few strokes of the pen, a few words and hints, so that the white surfaces can come alive and the words can bear us further out, across the boundary of our words, into that silence where God's mystery is vibrantly alive.

### Adversaries—and Allies

Before I left for Japan, I had a conversation about "mission" with a fisherman in northern Norway. He was the chairman of the local group that supported missionary work, and he wanted to know what kind of religion the Japanese had. I told him that most of them were Shintoists and Buddhists and that I myself was particularly interested in Buddhism.

"Buddhists?" he said, after a pause, drawing the word out slowly. "Tell me, what are 'Buddhists'? Are they the same sort of people as Baptists and Methodists and so on?"

I gave him a little information about *Buddhism*, enough for him to grasp that this was a different religion from Christianity.

After a new pause, he brought out the unambiguous deduction from what I had said: "Aha! I see! So you are *against* them!"

I do not remember my reply to this; I suppose that I tried to make him understand that although I desired to communicate the message of my own faith to the Buddhists, this did not necessarily make us adversaries.

In one sense, this conversation did not lead anywhere; but in another sense, it taught me something important. Our conversation came to a dead end because I had allowed the wrong question to dictate what I said. Once we see mission as an activity directed *against* others—whether we call them pagans, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, or humanists—the situation gets distorted and they become adversaries. The world is split into two, and the alternative is a simple *pro* or *contra*—truth or falsehood, light or darkness, God or Satan, good or evil. Obviously, it follows that we must fight against other religions and undermine them!

The fisherman was enthusiastically committed to Christian missionary work; but we should note that on this point, he took

the same position as many of the critics who accuse missionaries of cultural imperialism, aggression, and prejudices. They too see the proclamation of the Christian faith as something destructive—Christianity can flourish only on the ruins of what went before.

Both the fisherman and the critics overlook one essential point, however. Although there is much that separates Christianity from Buddhism and other religions, as human beings we are first of all allies, united in the attempt to discern meaning in a chaotic world.

We believe, each in our own way, that we have discovered the most important answers. Naturally, these can contradict one another. A Christian will not conceal his faith in God, the Creator who loves his world, who discloses his love and makes it an effective reality in Christ, and who leads us by the Spirit; and the prospect of sharing this faith with others fills us with joy and enthusiasm. But this does not prevent us from listening to the others. A new world is disclosed when we abandon our defense mechanisms and take the risk of touching the deeper yearnings and the unsolved puzzles. Our position changes, and we discover a genuinely spiritual fellowship that transcends all our boundaries. In some sense, we are on the same side.

And this entails a transformation of our understanding of missionary work. When our defense mechanisms crumble, a new sense of security emerges. As a Christian, I do not need to defend the Lord God; nor do I need to undermine other religions and worldviews. Mission does not mean winning victories over others, but rather encountering allies in a vulnerable openness. The words we employ take on a searching quality as we listen and ask questions. Our words become intriguing and dangerous. Our thoughts wrestle with those of others. Faith is shared, and faith is put to the test. Life encounters life.