



DHARMA TEACHER ORDER

NEWSLETTER VOLUME 7 EDITION 11

AUGUST 2021

Hello Readers,

Let me introduce you to

Jennifer Wheeler...

Jennifer Wheeler (M.A., Buddhist Studies) brings diverse spiritual background to her teaching. Raised in the Christian church, she began practicing Buddhism in 2001. A decade later, she ordained as a lay Dharma teacher and then as a novice monastic in the Vietnamese Zen tradition. When her spiritual experience could not be contained within the Buddhist tradition, she explored other pathways, including Advaita Vedanta and the Diamond Approach, in which she continues to be a student. Jennifer's spiritual activities include meditation, inquiry, embodiment practices, retreats, and teacher training with her longtime spiritual teacher, Tina Rasmussen.

J.Reale

The Seekers' Book Club

In the fall of 2018, I came across a challenging book that I really wanted to read with someone else, *The Emptied Christ of Philipians: Mahāyāna Meditations*, by John P. Keenan. After moving back to my home state of South Carolina, I had found community in the Lutheran church of my childhood, but compared to my fluency in the language of Buddhism, Christianity was proving difficult to understand.

I contacted Thay Tri Hoang to see if he had any suggestions. From the time I first met Thay, back in 2005, I recognized his openness to other traditions. Over time, I got used to be amazed at the books he had read, so I knew he'd have an idea. And he did. "Contact Fernando Camacho," was Thay's advice. Happily, Fernando not only agreed to read the book with me, he was enthusiastic about it!

Fernando and I spent months and months slowly working our way through *The Emptied Christ*. (We both highly recommend it, but it is a dense and footnote-heavy book!) At the end, we both wanted to keep reading together. As we shared a grounding in Christianity, we read a couple of other books from that tradition (*The Holy Trinity and the Law of Three*, by Cynthia Bourgeault, and *The Universal Christ*, by Richard Rohr).

Both Fernando and I had always been open to having others join us in reading and digesting these books. As we moved into new spiritual territory (*Rumi: Past and Present, East and West*, by Franklin Lewis; *The Flip: Epiphanies of Mind and the Future of Knowledge*, by Jeffrey Kripal, and *Gravity and Grace*, by Simone Weil), more friends began to join us, proving Fernando right in his assurance to me that our book club of two would grow over time.

Friends joined for their own reasons, but everyone shares a deep appreciation for and curiosity about the mystical experiences of others, and a commitment to our own unfoldment. Really, those are the only requirements for joining! Eventually, we came up with a name, The Seekers' Book Club. (It's open to everyone, by the way, whether you're a seeker or a finder or just an avid reader.) As of this writing, there are more than 15 people signing into Zoom for our biweekly meetings.

(Continued on page 2)

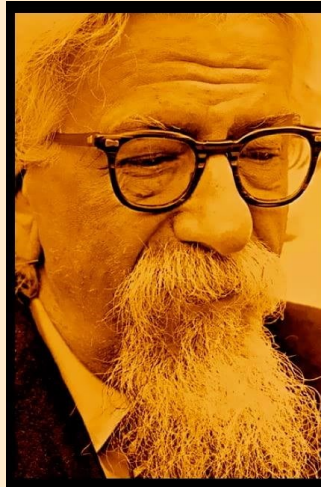
Seekers' Book Club, (continued)

"Rather than reading books only to compare them to what we already know, we open to what we don't know."

It probably goes without saying that while we may be reactive to certain books, our overall approach is open and curious. Rather than reading books only to compare them to what we already know, we open to what we don't know. This goes against our natural human inclinations. In that way, the book group is also a practice group! Through the grounding of a diverse book club community, we feel supported and solid as we grapple with the difficulties of a book or soar to heights of joy when a book really resonates and we can share that enthusiasm.

How do we read these books? Slowly! We agree on a modest number of pages and meet every other week via Zoom. To orient and settle ourselves, we meditate for a short time and then allow time for each person to check in briefly. We share what's been happening in our lives—joys and difficulties—and through that strengthen our sense of community. All perspectives on the books are welcome, whether you love a book or hate it, question it or completely devour it!

Our book club meets every other Monday from 7:30 pm to 9:00 pm on Zoom. We are currently reading *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, by Abraham Joshua Heschel. Email seekersbookclub@outlook.com to be placed on the invitation list or if you have any questions or need more information.



"Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement, [to] get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed."

- Abraham Joshua Heschel -

Some Thoughts on Stepping Outside Our Spiritual Comfort Zone

When we read about other traditions than our own (if we have one), it's tempting to try to make it all make sense within our paradigm. Whether that paradigm is religious or philosophical or cultural, it's still a framework. We naturally seek points of comparison. "Is this comparable to something in my tradition?" Or perhaps we compare it to our own experience. "This sounds like a certain stage of my path in my own tradition." This can be helpful to a certain extent, but in many ways, reading in other mystical traditions is like learning a foreign language.

Initially, when we learn a new language, we translate in our head, parsing word for word. Over time, however, as we steep in a language, we come to appreciate its nuances, its integrity. We know it experientially as more than a series of words that has cognates in our own language. There is an entire worldview, culture, history, depth of meaning to which a language gives us access. Also, we appreciate a language for its precision or its melodiousness (think Italian opera!) or its capacity to express swaths of meaning and understanding that our own native language lacks (consider the scores of words for "snow" in Inuit languages!). After a long period of initiation, we may find that we think or even dream in this language. Then, we have truly steeped in it, well beyond grammar and pronunciation.

Perhaps the analogy of friendship is also appropriate. We have a variety of friends, all shapes and sizes and colors and ages and ethnicities. We can call each of them "friend" and feel that in our heart as a single taste, a single throb. Perhaps we can then subdivide our friends. Some we know from work, some from school, some from church or temple. At the individual level, each friend is unique. We have some friends with whom we can share holidays, some with whom we share a particular hobby, and some with whom we share spiritual experience and understanding. We treasure each one for their uniqueness, for what their very being evokes in us. There is no need to compare our friends one to the other.

Finally, we can perhaps think in terms of the three centers described in many spiritual traditions: head, heart, and belly. Our intellectual curiosity is stimulated by the reading. When we read with others, invariably there will be those who are more familiar with a particular tradition or book or mystic. We learn from them. As we learn more about each other—our personal histories, our preferences, our points of view—our heart opens to each person's particular flavor, to how they engage a book, and our own love of truth expands. Over time, and as we engage more traditions and explore the diversity within traditions, we begin to feel more grounded in our own being, in our own place in this vast and dynamic spiritual universe. Our belly awakens to support our own unfolding, the opening of our heart, and the clarity of our head. That's a pretty rich potential merely just opening a book and sharing with friends!