What can a Christian learn from a Buddhist?

By Lt. Cmdr. Douglas Vrieland

This past week my wife and I had the delightful experience of attending the Kenchoji Temple in Kamakura where we participated in their "Zazen in English Experience" followed by a traditional Japanese tea ceremony. I suspect a number of the readers of this column might be surprised to learn that a Christian chaplain would do such a thing.

Christian readers might conclude I had sold out; non-Christian readers might question how I could possibly be so open minded. So why would a Christian chaplain attend a Buddhist temple?

I certainly did not attend to worship. The object of my adoration and faith, the recipient of my prayers is the Triune God whom I believe came into this world in Jesus Christ. I went, not to worship, but to learn.

I discovered that there is much I, as a Christian chaplain, can learn from Buddhism. I recall when I was in Seminary one of my professors suggested that we don't just read books that we agree with, but that we intentionally read material with which we disagree.

It is amazing what you can learn from someone with whom you have basic disagreements. And so the question that forms the title of this article: "What can a Christian learn from a Buddhist?"

One thing a Christian can learn from a Buddhist is Japanese culture. What a wonderful opportunity and privilege we have to be stationed for several months or several years in this interesting country, with its rich cultural heritage.

How can we get the most out of this experience? How can we begin to understand this society and culture that seems so strange to our Western minds?

Most of us have sampled Japanese food, perhaps the most superficial way to experience a culture. Some of us are trying to learn the language, but that takes years and most of us will not be here that long

Trying to understand a society's religion helps develop a deep understanding and appreciation for a culture. For example, Buddhism in general and Zen in particular have had a significant impact on Japanese art and what is considered beautiful.

Christians can also learn an appreciation for the created or natural world. The monks work hard keeping up the grounds of the temples, and as a result they are places of real beauty and tranquility.

While I certainly disagree with Buddhist teaching on the presence of spirits in the created world, I applaud them for the respect and care they have for the environment.

The Bible tells us, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Psalm 19:1), and "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." (Psalm 24:1), and that we are to "subdue the earth and rule over it" (Genesis 1:28). Christians have all too often taken this as license to violate and abuse the earth for our own short-term gain. Just compare the beauty of the grounds of a Buddhist temple with the grounds of a typical Christian church that has been paved over to accommodate our automobiles.

Finally, as a member of the military, my visit to the Buddhist temple reminded me that the warrior must take the time and energy to care for his or her own soul.

Kamakura has been called "the Ancient City of the Samurai". The Shogun rulers during the Kamakura era were drawn from the samurai—the warriors. They understood that the violence of a warrior's life can cause damage to the soul, and that without careful attention to spiritual matters the noble warrior can turn into the brutal barbarian. The temples of Kamakura brought needed balance into the samurai's life.

My visit to the Buddhist temple was a wonderful learning experience. I encourage all of us to take advantage of the many learning opportunities we have here in Japan. I just hope I have enough time to learn it all before I have to transfer back to the states!

Transition benefits:

TAMP helps prepare Sailors for civilian life

By MC1 Monique K. Hilley,
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WASHINGTON – The Transition Assistance Management Program (TAMP) provides a wide-array of services and opportunities to service members preparing to transition out of the military.

"TAMP helps Sailors get ready for civilian life," said Margarita Mason, transition manager, Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling Military and Family Support Center. "For many Sailors, the Navy was either their first job or their only career. TAMP helps these Sailors who have no clue how to adjust to the civilian world and acts as a stepping stone to ensure they are well prepared."

TAMP is one of the many programs offered at Commander, Navy Installations Command's (CNIC) Fleet and Family Support Centers (FFSC) worldwide.

Although every Sailor must complete DD Form 2648, Preseparation Counseling Checklist for Active Component Service Members, prior to separating, the form is just a small part of the overarching Transition Assistance Management Program.

While completing DD Form 2648 with a command career counselor, service members will be offered the opportunity to elect to receive counseling on a range of services and benefits, including, but not limited to, the transition assistance program (TAP), employment assistance, relocation assistance, education and training, health and life insurance, finances, reserve affiliation, veterans benefits briefing, disabled veterans benefits, post government service employment restrictions, and developing an individual transition plan (ITP).

DD Form 2648 should be completed one year prior to separation or two years prior to retirement.

"Many military members think that TAMP and TAP are the same thing, but they're not," said Mason.

"TAP is a U.S. Department of Labor workshop typically held at Fleet and Family Support Centers. FFSC's own TAMP program goes far beyond just TAP and provides Sailors with opportunities to receive one-on-one counseling, as little or as much as they need, whether they come once or every day, so that they are as prepared as possible to depart the military and enter the civilian workforce."

Once the checklist is complete, service members will use the options they have selected to develop an individual transition plan. This plan is not a military form, it is a plan developed by the Sailor, for the Sailor. The ITP can be used to identify educational, training and employment objectives and to develop a plan to help the service member achieve these objectives.

Many times, a large part of that plan should be to visit the local FFSC to obtain counseling and receive assistance with things such as job fairs, resume writing, financial counseling, relocation counseling, questions about veteran's benefits, and educational benefits and opportunities.

Those departing military service should also be sure to keep their spouse, children and extended family aware of each step of the transition process. Talk with your spouse and help your child deal with issues by listening to their concerns and talking about any fears they may have. By letting family actively participate in the process and allowing them to help, the service member can create a more positive experience for everyone involved.

Mason reiterated that whatever the final goals are, the key to a successful transition is to "start early and plan well."

Those who would like to learn more about the Transition Assistance Management Program should visit their local Fleet and Family Support Center or visit www.nffsp.org.

TAMP is one of many transition benefits available to separating Sailors including those affected by the Enlisted Retention Board (ERB). For the latest ERB information, visit the Navy Personnel Command's ERB Web site at www.public.navy.mil/bupers-npc/boards/ERB/Pages/default2.aspx.