

Chung Hyun Kyung
Sister Hildegard

A Presentation given at the Christian-Buddhist Retreat
Rupertsberger Gewölbe in Bingen on April 4, 2014

Thank you very much for coming. In honor of Hildegard von Bingen, who is a great woman mystic in human history to me, let us start our gathering in silence. And you focus on your breath. So you sit comfortably with your back straight. Meditation is very simple. It has three components: you stop and you breath and you look deeply into yourself. Wherever you are when you do that, this is a meditation. So let us begin. - *Meditation bell. Two minutes of meditation in silence* – Thank you.

I will begin with one poem. This is by *Jalaluddin Rumi* , an Islamic Sufi mystic (1207-1273). I want this poem as a gift to you and our sister Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179)

*Come to the orchard in the spring.
There is candle, flower and wine.
If you don't come, these do not matter.
If you come, these do not matter.*



Orchard at the Hildegard-Forum in Bingen, April 2014 - Foto A.Esser

Thank you coming. This is a very beautiful spring evening. You must have a lot of other interesting places to go tonight. But you chose to be here. Thank you for that choice. According to Buddhist tradition, even if you just touch the sleeves of each other, it has been prepared for millions of years. And if we really get together and stand two and a half hours together in this beautiful spring night, many years of Karma is accumulated that we are here together. So I honor and appreciate this karmic connection.

Tonight I want to share with you about my learning from Hildegard as Asian woman. So today, I want to speak from my three spiritual traditions.

My first tradition is **Christian mysticism** which Hildegard von Bingen expressed so beautifully. I was born and raised in three generation Christian Presbyterian family. Luckily, I was not raised in a fundamentalist church. My church was a very ecumenical and open church. So my memory of the church is very good. Christmas presents, Easter eggs and many joyful plays at Sunday schools. And also our church is a very much socially engaged and justice oriented church. So for me Christianity means that we express love and justice in this world. And we live our vision of "Kingdom of God", and we say "Kindermokkahat" (?) which is feast of the equals in this life. I am so happy that I was born in a Christian family. I went to one of the biggest Christian Mission schools in South Korea, called *Ewha Women's University*, which was founded by American lay missionary women 120 years ago. It was very interesting at the time that proper families did not want to send their daughters to these "Western devils". They thought Westerners were devils. When the women missionaries opened the school and "nobody" came, they started their school with three children: the first one was a young concubine for a big business man; this man wanted to send this little girl so that she could learn English so that he could have a business with America. The second one was an orphan girl that was abandoned on the street because she had cholera. As these lay woman missionaries were also medical doctors, they cured this abandoned orphan and she became a second student. And the third woman was a slave. The missionaries rescued her and she became the third student. Now, after 120 years later, we have 25.000 students and 17 colleges. And I was really happy to go to the missionary university because everybody told me you can do anything and you can be anybody. And there is no male student. We are the president. We are the leaders. We can be anything. We fixed the school and we did everything that men were supposed to do. So we become really embodied spirit. We can do anything. So this Christian tradition has been opening many doors to me.

My second tradition is the **Buddhist tradition**. I became a Buddhist practitioner by choice. Maybe some of you have heard about my work. I was a keynote speaker at the 7th Assembly of the World Council of Churches. I made a new interpretation of the Holy Spirit from a feminist Asian liberation perspective. I wanted to bring the Asian tradition and the whole feminist theological contributions of sexuality, sensuality, emotion and body to the interpretation of the Holy Spirit. I also wanted to lift up the liberating power of the Holy Spirit from the Asian theological perspective. So I brought aboriginal dancers and aboriginal musician with didgeridoo and I gave a presentation with dance and music and also a shamanistic ritual from Korea calling the spirits. After that one speech I became overnight famous in the world. Because the Orthodox Church thought that my interpretation is totally pagan, heretical and it is not a Christian interpretation, I got all kinds of attacks from people around the world. They called me 'witch', 'heretic' and a person that has committed the sin

of 'apostasy'. I have not any idea why they were doing that, because they asked me to have a new interpretation of the Holy Spirit from my perspective, from the Asian women liberation perspective. So I did what they asked me for. And, when I was totally honest from my tradition, Western Christians could not take it. They got very angry. But an interesting thing is that women around the world – from the called younger churches of Asia, Africa and Latin America - they thought I made the most creative interpretation of the Holy Spirit. So the *New York Times* wrote about me, and the German *Spiegel*. They thought there was a passionate applause and a passionate silence after my talk. Then I started to get praise and criticism every day from all around the world. The worst thing actually happened in Korea. Korean fundamentalists sent me a letter saying that according to the Old Testament, you should kill a Shaman. And I am a shaman, or the daughter of a shaman. I got these very obsessed fundamentalists. I don't know who they are but they sent me postcards with red letters every day that I should repent and my life is threatened. But the worst thing happened to my personal life.

My husband who was a revolutionary in the Korean student movement became a religious fundamentalist after marriage. So when all the Korean fundamentalists got together to attack me, he took the side of the fundamentalists, writing me a letter that I should repent. I got to the point that my professional life is breaking down, and that my personal life, my marriage, is breaking down. I did not know what to do about my career, because I got all these threats. And I did not know what to do about my love and my marriage because my husband attacked me on the side of the fundamentalists. At that time I went through a deep depression. I really walked through a dark night of soul in my life. So I sought help from other people. At first I went to my minister. The pastor told me: "*Your husband is your cross. The way Jesus carried his cross, you have to carry your cross, which is your husband.*" Then I went to a Catholic priest, and he told me: "*Love your husband the way the virgin Mary loved Jesus.*" But the thing is that Mary loved Jesus because Jesus is her son, but my husband is not my son. So it did not help me, really. – Then I also went to psychotherapy. I had a wonderful therapist. But meeting her once a week, did not really help me much. - During that time by accident, I met the Korean Zen-Master Saung Sun. I was teaching at Harvard University in Boston at that time. From the outside I looked great. I had arrived at Harvard University. But inside I was dying. I did not know what to do. I was at this place where I did not want to get up in the morning. I wished to die in my bed. On my way from University to my apartment, I just suddenly saw this Korean temple, a meditation center. Because of my suffering I walked in. They had a so called "interview with the Zen-master" that day. I did not know what "interview" was, I did not know anything about Buddhism at that time. So I walked into the Zen-master's room and sat down. He asked me: "*Why are you here?*" I told him all my melodrama about my Che-Guevara-husband who became a religious fundamentalist, about that I gave this presentation and they called me bitch and heretic, about that I was just suffering so much and I just wanted to die. I just poured out my suffering to him. After all that pouring out of my suffering, I was rather eager to listen to his answer. He looked at me with utter calmness. And he asked me just one word. He answered: "*So?*" I was so angry at him! I always wanted to say inside: Fuck you! You don't understand psychology 101. You don't understand pastoral care 101! Where is your sympathy? But somehow, his utter stillness touched me very deeply. And he said - after "*So!?*" - "*The first noble truth of Buddhism is: 'life is suffering'. You just start to understand what life is. Everybody is suffering. Why do you think you are so special?*" – I wanted to punch him. But rather than punching him, something really hit me like a lightning. Then he said with utter quietness: "*But there is*

a way out of suffering. If you want to learn that, shut up your mouth and go to the Dharma-room, sit down, meditate and you will know how you get liberated from your suffering." And he gave me a task. He said: *"Come to the temple, every day, a hundred days, at 4 a.m. If you can do that, you get out of your suffering."* And out of anger, I did. I wanted to show off to him I can do this every day, a hundred days. But in these hundred days something changed in me. At the first two weeks, the only thing I wanted to be is a serial killer. I was so angry. Then, after anger, the next like three weeks, I was so sad, I was crying, crying, crying like a crying baby. The next three weeks I became totally despaired. Then, after all these turbulences of emotions, I got to the point, where there is a big space. No more stories anymore. There was a sense of spaciousness and freedom, and a very deep stillness. I felt I was getting enlightened. I ran into the Zen-master's room and I asked him: *"Zen-master, Zen-master, I am having this experience. Am I getting enlightenment?"* And he asked me: *"Oh. Describe your experience."* So I described my experience. Then he said: *"Oh, wow yes, you are enlightened! But, too bad, you just lost it! Because you talked about it, you already lost your enlightenment."* And he said: *"Getting your enlightenment, is relatively easy, but maintaining your enlightenment, is a lifelong job. Go back to your meditation, because you have just lost your enlightenment!"* So his teaching has opened me to the whole world of Buddhism. It became my spiritual tradition. I proudly say: Yes, I am a Buddhist Christian. A kind of a new hybrid, like a mixture. So my naughty students sometimes ask me questions in my Buddhist-Christian dialog class. They raise their hands and they ask: *"Professor Chung are you married to Jesus and sleeping with Buddha?"* To these naughty students you have to be naughtier! So I say, actually it is not like that. Actually I do threesome, with Jesus, Buddha and me. And they keep quiet. So Buddhism and Christianity is inseparable in me, and it is possible to be 100 percent Christian and 100 percent Buddhist at the same time.

My spiritual tradition is eco-feminism. For me the oppression of women and the oppression of nature is directly connected. Eco-feminism is an intellectual or social movement, which will liberate women and nature together. This eco-feminism has first been articulated by the French woman-philosopher Françoise de Bonne in 1976.

Today I will have a dialog with sister Hildegard von Bingen from these three perspectives. Many spiritually oriented people say, twenty-first century is the beginning of a second Axial Age. They say, the first Axial Age was from 500 B.C. to 500 A.D.. Confucius, Laotse, Socrates, Buddha, Jesus, all of these people came with enlightenment and illumination. Our time is a second axial time, a second movement of openness of our consciousness. But there are differences. The first axial time, this enlightenment, was individual and local: Jesus was in Galilee, Buddha in Khabila, Laotse in China. It was very local. But the second axial time, this opening of consciousness is collective and global. So, that we are connected with the internet is not an accident, but a symptom of the second axial time. About this time many visionaries from East and West are talking.

Xxxx

For example Korean visionaries in 19. century said that the whole Asian philosophy is a Yin and Yang. They say, the last 5000 Years, Yang, this masculine energy, rose up and ruled the world. The Yang energy became too strong, it broke the balance. So we are entering the time, that Yin, feminine energy, is rising all around the world, to correct this overuse of Yang-energy and make balance and healing. And they say the same thing in the east and in the west. For example an American mystic, who is leading the Shaker-movement, she said, the first coming of Jesus came in the masculine form, in a male body, the second coming of

Christ will come as a female body. So when she comes, this masculine energy Jesus started, will be completed by this feminine Christ. Then we will have a completion of human salvation. So this is a very interesting time. That is why people all around the world are so much into sister Hildegard von Bingen. It is so interesting that so many women around the world are ecstatic about Hildegard. But is also interesting for me to observe that Germans are not as interested in Hildegard. Maybe it is like Jesus said: "Prophets are not so welcome in their hometown". But what she taught us in 12th century, is so matching which what we are trying to do in 21st century. In a way she really embodied Christian mysticism and ancient goddess-tradition. And openness to science and art and social movement. So I am totally mesmerized by this sister. So I want to be like her when I grow up. *Laughter* So I will tell you how I think Buddhism, Christian mysticism and eco-feminism are meeting In Hildegard von Bingen's theology and spirituality. There are many, but I chose seven points. So I will show you these seven points tonight.

First: Out of all her teaching, what touched me most, is her teaching of God as a greening-power. She said, when God is present, everything is green, wet, juicy, warm and it is not luke-warm, it is fiery, there is life, there is joy! (As you want?) so God is the greening-power – this is a really postmodern idea. Traditional theology talk about God as and old white man with a beard, sitting on a cloud, with omnipotent power, punishing all bad man and give a reward to the good people. But whole God is energy, greening energy, life-giving energy, creative energy. This is the most (...?) of quantum physics. Quantum physicists, they confess God like this, this creative power. So our whole understanding of God is really meeting this postmodern world-view. And also Buddhism, as you know, there is a whole image of the Green Tara in Tibetan tradition, this Buddhist Bodhisattva, she is totally green. She is the archetypal Gaia. And also eco-feminists, like Vandana Shiva from India, she is a Hindu; she said: "The principle we live by as eco-feminists, is a forest principal." But what is a "forest-principal"? This is a feminine principal in India: If forest is more divers (of the species) they are more reciprocal, mutual, benefiting and sustainable, the have the strongest immune-system to flourish. So eco-feminists really ask us to learn from the forest. So Hildegard von Bingen's vision of God as a greening-power and Christ as a green man, is really fittingly to eco-feminist vision and Buddhist vision, where every living being has a Buddha nature in it. And the Buddha nature is a life giving enlightenment. That is the first point.

The second point is: She gave this creation spirituality of interconnectedness. She said: "This Lady, called love, lady-love, created the whole world." So, out of love the whole world is created. And she saw this creation as a very intrinsic interconnectedness of the web of life. This whole understanding of interconnectedness is Core-Buddhism. They talk of the "net of Indra", as everything is connected with everything else. And this is very much also modern physics – postmodern physics, it is the same thing. All of us are the explosion of the first star. So the stardust is all within us. So Catholic priest Thomas Berry said: "We are beings, we are the first explosion of the star, evolutionized (to?) singing Opera." That's us. Everybody is connected with everybody from the beginning. Hildegard von Bingen talked about this "web of life" in the 12th century. And Buddhist notion of emptiness – "Sunyata", many western people misunderstood it as a psychological emptiness, loneliness or nothingness. Buddhist emptiness is no psychological emptiness or nothingness. Buddhist emptiness means: Empty of what? You are empty of what? You are empty of unchanging, substantial, eternal self. Everything is changing in this matrix, called "life". Therefore this [Hildegards] "web of life" and Buddhist interconnectedness of everything is directly connected. So emptiness in

another name is fullness, it is connected with everything. You don't have any unchanging, permanent nature. You are changing according to all these conditions and relations (...?) You are always becoming in relation to new condition and new relations. Also eco-feminism talks about interconnectedness of everything. Before, we had this spirit and matter spring in western philosophy, this dualism. But eco-feminism tried to bring spirit and matter together.

Third point: Hildegard von Bingen's mysticism. She is a visionary. She is a seer. She sees beyond the names and forms. And she maybe clear about God, (whichas?) can not describe the reality of God. God is this beyond all what we think, God is. And Buddhism, Zen-Buddhism also says: "The core of Zen is a don't-know-mind." This is not like "I-don't-know", like an epistemological not-knowing, it is always like an ontological "don't-know". Life is a dark, ever changing and ever becoming matrix. In that open space, this "don't-know"-place, everything is possible. This is pure (...nal?) Buddhism. So mystics in western tradition, like Meister Eckhart, he said: "God is pure emptiness." And also eco-feminism, they call of "deep ecology": We can not solve the problem of climate-change and ecological disaster, ceased to see nature as an object, we need to save. Only if we truly see nature as a subject, and if we have an I-and-though-relationship with nature, we can solve the problem of the climate-change. So, rather than seeing all the nature as a thing, we have to see it as a fully alive living being, vibrating with the green energy and make a connection. So this is nature-mysticism.

Point no. four: Hildegard von Bingen emphasized the importance of a wisdom knowledge. She talked about how wisdom is with God from the beginning. And wisdom was always female. And it is the same, wisdom is not only knowledge, it is embodied knowledge. It is the same in Buddhism. One of my favorite writers, Hermann Hesse from Germany, he wrote the book, called Siddhartha. There is one scene, Govinda and Siddhartha talking with each other and Siddhartha talks (says) to Govinda: "The water you see now, you will never see again." And also this wisdom you only know by experience. Nobody can give you wisdom. Only out of your living you can gain this wisdom. Also feminist theology, feminist emphasize feminist knowledges embody the knowledge. Male theologians talk from their heads only. But feminist theology speaks from our heads, our hearts and our wombs. So we talk about embodied women's experience of the divine. It is a wisdom knowledge.

Fifth point: Justice. Hildegard von Bingen is a woman worrier. She criticized the pope. She criticized the president king. Even I don't see any nun, who is doing that in our time, but she really criticized them. And she said, the daughter of the king, of God, is Justitia – justice. So she really made the point, that your spirituality must be connected with holy anger. The spiritual woman should be a worrier woman, not just crying in the corner. One of our teachers, Beverly Harrison, talked about the "power of anger for the work of love". And her lesbian partner (Carter Haven?) wrote that justice is a right relationship. And also in Buddhism, enlightenment is just 50 percent, you just liberate yourself. The other 50 percent is, you become a Bodhisattva. And you will have to ask "how may I help you?" to everybody who is suffering. And eco-feminist also talks about eco-justice. Tonight we not just talk about human justice, we have to talk also about justice for nature.

Sixth point: Science. I think Hildegard von Bingen is so open to science. She really appreciated intellectual questioning. "Scivias" means: "Know The Way", what is very much connected with Buddhism. Buddhism said, it is not religion, it is a way. And you can only know that way, looking deeply into yourself. When Buddha died, he said: "Don't ever

worship me. I'm not God. And don't ever just follow me. I'm just the finger pointing the moon. So you don't look at my finger, but look at the moon with your own eyes." So Buddhism said, if you investigate your own faith and there is no answer, it can not be your truth. Don't follow. Don't believe anybody, who says you should believe this. And if you find the truth – then believe. Don't believe anything, other people say you should believe. And also many eco-feminist scientists said a very interesting thing. This is: The woman's way of knowing – for example, there is a woman who got the Nobel Prize in Biology. What she discovered, is a "jumping gene". She graduated from Cornell University, in the USA, but the way she started(?) a corn is very different from male scientists. Male scientists treat the corn as an object, but she treats every corn as a subject. Every morning she went to the corn field and gave a name to the corn, like "Mary", "...", "Susan", "Maria", and so she gave all different names to different corns. And she discovered, that these corns, in order to make the best living possibility, they jumped to another gene, making a mutation, creating a new gene. And she proved this "jumping gene". she got the Nobel Prize for this. so people asked her: "How did you know about this?" And she said: "Corns told me." *Laughter*. "They revealed." So some people, male scientists, called her a witch. But this is exactly what Hildegard von Bingen discovered this (in her?) "Physica", these herbals, how they are good for healing. There is one line in Hildegard von Bingen, in the book. She was in fasting, in deep prayer, she walked through the field and the plants talked to her. "I am good at stomach-ache" – "I'm good at headache..." and they revealed their secret to Hildegard von Bingen. So, Hildegard von Bingen and this Dr. [Barbara] Mc Clintock were just sisters in kind(?) of her spirit. She was a mystic and the other woman is a scientist, but they have a total openness to the Universe.

The seventh point: I think that Hildegard von Bingen knows this whole tradition of shamanic healing. Some scholars said, that Hildegard von Bingen knew this Celtic tradition, ancient Celtic tradition in Rhine-area. And Celtic tradition is full of strong goddesses, pagan goddesses, before Christianity. And also they said, Celtic tradition is connected to the Indian Upanishad. So there are archeologists, who said, Indian (is severed?) with the Celtic tradition, there is an Indian thought, Upanishad thought was rooted in Celtic tradition. This (Hindu?) (cosmowegian?) and strong goddesses like Kali. And Hildegard was totally depressed in bed in her early forties. Out of the depression, she wrote, first of all. That is a mostly shamanic path. Most of the shamans go deeply in the underworld through the degree of a deep depression or almost death. Then hit the bottom and then they come up as a (...?) healer. I think that Hildegard von Bingen's journey was like that. When you hit the bottom of this deep depression, and you come up, you are fearless and you know the darkness of other people, and you know how to touch them. The same is in Buddhism. Most of the popular Buddhism is connected with the shamanism. Tibetan Buddhism, connected with the Bourne-religion, a shamanistic religion, Korean Buddhism is the same, connected with Korean shamanism, Japanese Buddhism with the Shintoism. In a way, shamanism is giving a cosmic bodily incarnation of this life. And eco-feminism is an intellectual resurrection of witch-tradition, a wild women tradition. You know "witch", comes from "Wicca", which means "wisdom". This is the deepest wise-women-shamanic-tradition. Most of the witches were killed, specially in European tradition, because they were so (obey?) of this chaotic, wild, regenerative female power. But this is coming back. All around the world. Because patriarchy messed up the world so much, this divine feminine, this wild regenerative energy is rising all around the world. So, this is a good time for Hildegard von Bingen to (revisit?) us. In 21st century, Hildegard von Bingen is HOT. *Laughter* Her hot

teaching is really cool. *Laughter* And also she is really hip. *Laughter* So I am a direct descendant of Hildegard von Bingen, like all of you German women. I think, you are as excited, as mesmerized, as I am and as are many women around the world, who really want to follow her light. So, (this was ?) my journey with Hildegard von Bingen and with that seven points tonight. But I think, that millions of points will come to me in the future. So thank you so much. *Applause.*