

# Is an empty altar a liberation from images?



**Highland Views**  
Chris Highland  
Guest columnist

Lee was a good friend of mine and a Zen Buddhist priest. He passed away over five years ago. I was missing his voice, so I found a recording of a “Dharma” talk (a teaching sermon) he presented at the Buddhist farm where I often went for retreats. In his talk, Lee spoke with his usual gentle and good-natured manner, offering several meaningful images to meditate with. One was a story of an altar in India where followers came to honor the life and teachings of the Buddha.

Surrounding the altar were various items that symbolized the teacher. I can’t remember the details, but let’s say they were a book, a robe, a small tree (where Buddha sat), and other symbols calling attention to the Buddha’s instructions to his disciples. In the center of the altar there was ... nothing. No statue, no depiction, no face or frame of Buddha. Empty. An altar to the great teacher that did not even show the teacher.

This got me thinking again, about the distraction of divine images. During my years as a Christian believer, I could always turn to a representation of Jesus. He was everywhere: in a stained-glass window, a poster, a book, a painting, a sculpture. Most importantly, he was in my mind. I had a good idea what he looked like, not only in his earthly form, but as the heavenly being watching me from above. The most indelible images of Jesus came from television and movies. Though I knew he wasn’t American, he remained a white man with long hair who – no surprise – looked a lot like me. Years later I came to see that I had essentially made an idol of those images and my own mental image. God had to be much greater than any representation, including Jesus himself (recalling the commandment against “graven images”).

Think of an altar you’ve seen. Who or what is lifted up there? What’s the purpose of a visual likeness of something we have no idea what it looks like? Jews, Muslims, Quakers and others never have representations of a deity, for several reasons: they do not want to create an idol to worship, and they believe there is no way to “represent” the divine anyway. In some traditions, prayers are

directed to statues or other depictions of god or gods. If you ask the one praying, they would probably say they are not praying to the likeness itself, but to the One represented. In this case, the statue or painting serves as a vehicle, a conduit, calling attention to something greater, higher, beyond the physical.

Maybe that altar in India described by Lee offers a clue to our liberation from images, at least those images that distract from who we are, what we must do. When the person – the human being – became divine or sacred – a god – they got the spotlight. Yes, their teachings have always been taken seriously, but the focal point returns to their physical form. Our physical world, including our physical form, fades in the face of the human face of God. Was this the intent of the teacher? Did each extraordinary historic person live and teach and leave a legacy primarily to be the illuminated star on center stage? (and it may be good to ask: Were they actually that extraordinary, or is it that we don’t want them to be ordinary, too much like us?). The images we create, the altars we bow to, can look very human, even rather normal, but when you place a human form up high, on an altar, often un-touchable and idealized, it becomes

something more. This is one way altars can “alter” our thinking: we wish to be more, so we raise up super-humans we can honor, respect or worship. We may believe they made us, yet the uncomfortable truth is these are the gods we create, in material and mind.

When he gave his talk, my Zen friend Lee gave out apples to the gathered students. Near the end of the lesson, he told the story of how some carpenters came to the farm to build a meditation hall. Workers ate their lunch on the site, and after they left, and time went by, residents noticed a small apple tree was growing by the sanctuary. The fruit Lee gave to the students were apples he picked from that tree. He spoke of the rain, the mist, the dew, the moisture that fell on the roots, the branches, the leaves and the apples without discriminating. Each apple is a gift from that tree that was itself a gift left “by mistake” by those carpenters. Was the tree an altar?

If there was only an apple on the altar, would that be enough?

*Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (chighland.com).*