

# PRAYERBALLS

Art objects for prayer and meditation in the dialogue between Christianity and Zen-Buddhism



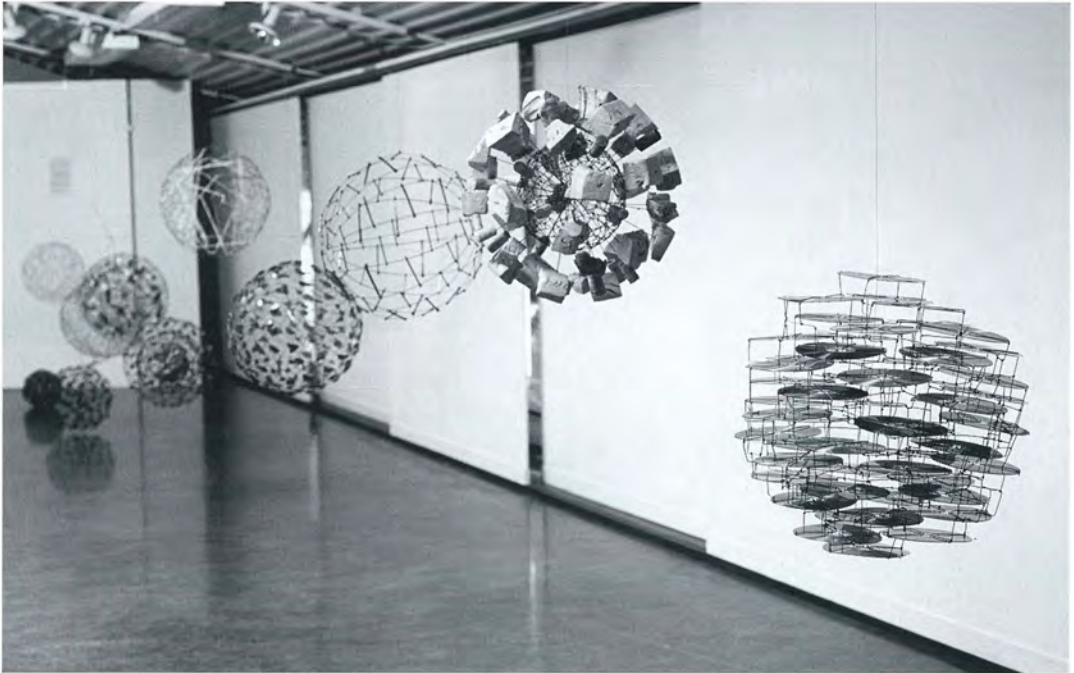
GRETE REFSUM

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*Ball of Porphyry*  
2001  
diameter 22-24 cm

## Statement of problem

Dalai Lama says that to create peace it first has to be developed inside the individual human being and from the peaceful individual it may expand further to family, society and finally to the whole world.<sup>1</sup> All religions offer various meditative practices, techniques, or traditions of prayer that can help the individual to find her/his inner peace. After the Second World War interest in Japanese Zen-Buddhism has increased in the Western world<sup>2</sup> and an inter-religious dialogue between Christian and Zen-Buddhist thinking has been developed.<sup>3</sup> The meeting between the Christian tradition of prayer based on words with the Zen-Buddhist meditative tradition of *za-zen* focused on sitting posture and breathing may be enriching. In the Roman Catholic tradition of prayer the rosary and the Stations of the Cross have been central, but in our time and part of the world the practice of these prayers is declining. In the Lutheran tradition of Norway prayers are said or sung, but a silent meditative practice is lacking.<sup>4</sup> Instead Norwegians are known to “seek God in nature” rather than in church. The question is whether the Christian traditions of prayer may be developed and revitalized by Asian influence so as to fulfill the spiritual needs of people today.<sup>5</sup> If so, one would expect that the visual and tactile objects, such as beads, cross/crucifix and visual images used



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in the Christian tradition of prayer would change. To develop and produce such new objects intended for prayer/meditation is the challenge for artists and designers, and that is what this project is all about.

### Aims of the project

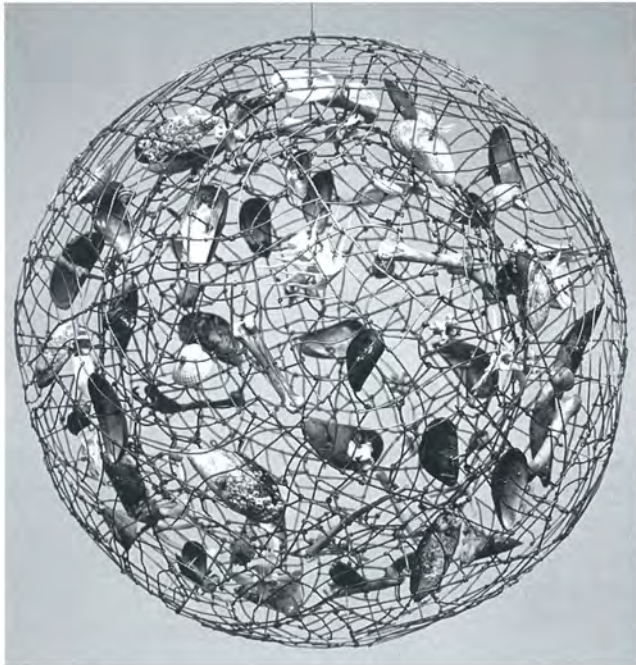
By a documented production of new art objects this project aims at contributing to:

- a renewal of the Christian tradition of prayer;
- the development of Christian iconography;
- the ecumenical dialogues within Christianity;
- the inter-religious dialogue between Christianity and Zen; and
- the knowledge building and research community in the field of the visual arts and design.

### Literary survey

Both Buddhist and Western Christian culture have many living artists and designers who work in their respective religious tradition.<sup>6</sup> There are also

*Evolution  
exhibited 2003.  
A decade of the  
rosary reflecting the  
geological circuit  
and development  
of culture.*



4 Detail

3

*Animals 4. stage in Evolution.  
Diameter ca 40 cm. metal thread,  
animal remains, shells, bones etc.*

numerous contemporary artists and designers who extend their culturally spiritual tradition into contemporary expressions.<sup>7</sup> Looking at visual images presented in literature on Christianity and Zen, however, two features are striking: first, traditional images are chosen;<sup>8</sup> secondly, images from the two traditions are placed side by side.<sup>9</sup> Images that reflect the dialogue between Christianity and Zen and new objects intended for prayer/meditation are difficult to find.

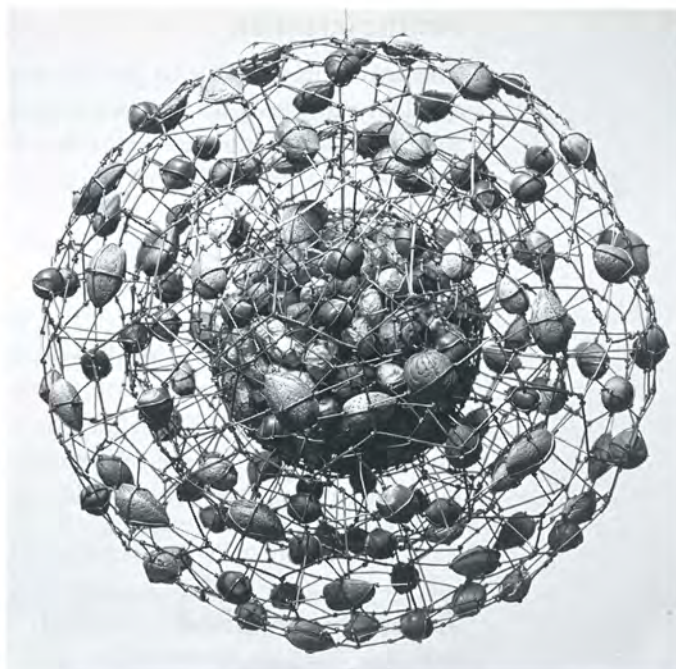
### Context and ideas

In the tradition of prayer /meditation there are basically three elements:

- prayers;
- positions and methods; and
- praying objects.

In za-zen there is a sitting position, thumbs touching each other, and a focus on breathing; in the Christian tradition there are verbal prayers, standardized or personal, a lot of possible positions, as well as praying objects. However, in both Zen and Christian thinking everyday activities in





5 and 6

*Stage 5. Store of food  
(Norwegian "fjorråd")  
various nuts, metal thread*

themselves may be regarded as prayer/meditation. Since I am both culturally and spiritually Christian, the perspective in this study will be Christian. Personally, I enjoy the freedom to pray in various ways according to circumstances, and I experience my artistic work as a kind of meditation. This project adds to my previous work and continuous artistic process. I worked for seven years with the *Cross/Crucifix Series*, exploring cross/crucifix forms in order to understand more of the mystery of the cross; then another seven years on the *Small Altar Series*, sculptures made for private meditation and prayer that reflect the resurrection and the sacraments. Now, I enter a period in which I want to explore prayer and meditation by making objects that somehow reflect my meditative practice based on the Christian tradition and inspired by Zen. As a Roman Catholic, I would like to take the rosary as the point of departure. The structure of the rosary is to say a prayer while holding onto a bead, then moving on to another prayer and another bead.<sup>10</sup> Taken further, this structure of praying means that any prayer may be said while holding onto something.<sup>11</sup> By combining Christian and Zen-Buddhist traditions, I suggest that the merely holding or touching an object in silence may be a kind of prayer.

### **Artistic intention**

The artistic intention is to produce art objects that reflect contemporary theology influenced by Zen-Buddhist thinking;<sup>12</sup> objects that can be seen, touched, held, or carried so that they visually and/or tactilely are an integrated part of the meditation/prayer.

### **Form, material, techniques**

The bead, the circle, hemisphere, or ball, is taken as basis in the artistic process in combination with the dimensions of the body, particularly the hand.

The materials used will be found in nature, stone, vegetation, and traces of animals, in combination with metal wire.

Technically, my personally developed techniques of binding metal wire will be used.

### **Theory and method**

This project is basically one of visual art, a developmental research project by producing art. It builds upon the theory and methodology developed in my Master and Doctoral theses. The inspirational sources will be given account for, the artistic process documented, and the results discussed.

### **Design of research**

The project will be carried out in several phases. At the moment literary information is being collected, experiments of form, materials, and techniques are being carried out. Next, the new objects will be used in relevant milieus and the feedback will give rise to the improvement and production of new varieties.

The project resulted in *Evolution* finished 2003, see [www.refsum.org](http://www.refsum.org).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Preface in *Nhât Hanh*.
- <sup>2</sup> The Christian monk and writer William Johnston S.J. says that: "Buddhism is going to make an enormous impact on Christianity of the coming century. If there has been a Hellenized Christianity ... there is every likelihood that the future will see the rise of an Oriental Christianity." (Johnston, xiv).
- <sup>3</sup> See authors like Suzuki, Merton, Graham, Watts, Kennedy, Thelle, *Nhât Hanh*.
- <sup>4</sup> See Arvidsson.
- <sup>5</sup> See for instance Kennedy (2000) and Thelle (2001).
- <sup>6</sup> The English sculptor 20th century Jacob Epstein is a good example of the Christian tradition, the book *The Art of Twentieth-Century Zen* may represent the other tradition (Seo 2000).
- <sup>7</sup> See for instance Lin and Leung and Kaplan.
- <sup>8</sup> Kennedy (2000) uses twelfth century Chinese pictures as illustrations (5). The exception to the rule is the inclusion of a work by Jacob Epstein in his book *Buddha & Christ* (Elinor), otherwise Elinor deals with traditional artworks.
- <sup>9</sup> Typical is the frontpage of *Zen Spirit, Christian Spirit* (Kennedy 1999) that shows half Buddha and half Christ. The same is seen on the cover of the book by Elinor *Buddha & Christ* from 2000. In this connection the devotion to Holy Mary is of less importance. Cf. note 11.
- <sup>10</sup> In this connection the devotion to Holy Mary is of less importance.
- <sup>11</sup> In Orthodox Churches there are woollen prayer bands with knots on which the Jesus prayer may be said.
- <sup>12</sup> Including ecotheology (see Kristiansen) and theologies that explore spirituality as such regardless of confessional borders (as for instance Reat).

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