

OBITUARY

Catholic nun taught inmates to find freedom through Zen meditation

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How does a Juilliard-trained concert violinist and Roman Catholic nun wind up as a Zen master who ministered to some of the world's toughest prisoners?

Few people confounded religious sensibilities the way Sister Elaine MacInnes did. She certainly didn't mean to. A gentle, soft-spoken and grandmotherly Catholic nun – not remote, austere or inscrutable – she was laser-focused when it came to teaching Zen meditation and yoga to prison inmates and infusing them with a rare serenity.

She saw neither tradition as competing with the other, but as complementary paths. If anything, she said Zen made her a better Catholic and vice-versa, explaining that in Buddhist practice, the word “spirit” more or less equals its meaning in Christianity: “The presence of the sacred within.”

Sr. Elaine, who died in Toronto on Nov. 29 at the age of 98, was founder of Freeing the Human Spirit. Over the years, the organization gained entry to some two dozen correctional facilities in Canada, mostly in Ontario, to teach inmates rudimentary Zen meditation and yoga, and impart the benefits of stilling the mind; to borrow a Zen concept, thinking about not thinking.

She was no fan of prisons. They were “horrible and loud.” As Sr. Elaine saw it, the program had a proven track record of helping prisoners improve their moods, self-esteem, even sleep, and reduce their overall anger. “The alienation many prisoners have just drops away. It's a wonderful moment for them,” she noted in one of her many interviews with reporters, who considered her story irresistible.

She could quote from memory one of the hundreds of letters she received from prisoners, this one from a 20-year-old man who used to sit in his cell and burn and cut himself just to externalize his pain. After meditating for 20 minutes in the morning and another 20 at night, he wrote, “not only is the pain better, but for the first time in my life, I see a tiny spark of something within myself that I can like.”

“That’s beautiful,” Sr. Elaine would whisper. “A tiny spark.”

She was born March 7, 1924 in Moncton, N.B., one of four children of John MacInnes, a salesman, and the former Georgina Melanson, a conductor who played piano and violin and insisted all her children take up an instrument. At age 10, Elaine found a book about St. Thomas Aquinas, the great Christian thinker who posited that God was the First Mover, able to set the universe in motion without any prior cause. The notion got her thinking.

“I had grandiose ideas about God,” she told the U.S. Buddhist magazine *Tricycle* in 2009. “The very fact that God was action – so close, so alive all the time – was something that startled me when I was 10. It’s still startling me.”

She studied violin at Mount Allison University in Sackville and then at the storied Juilliard School of Music in New York. After teaching the instrument at Mount Royal College Conservatory in Calgary and playing in the Calgary and Edmonton symphony orchestras, she entered Our Lady’s Missionaries convent, east of Ottawa, in 1953 at the relatively advanced age of 30. “I felt called,” she wrote in her autobiography, *Light Sitting in Light*. “Just like that. No fireworks.”

She took her final vows in 1958 and received her first posting as a missionary to Japan to teach music and English and spread the faith. A pivotal episode took place on March 25, 1965 (she remembered that date) when she took a cable car up Mount Hiei, near Kyoto, to meet a famous monk who lived there. Somon Horisawa asked a simple question that startled Sr. Elaine anew: “How do you pray?”

She was stumped. The monk elaborated: “Do you do it with your body?” She replied that in Christianity, that’s not important. He said, “But it is. It’s very important.” The answer was meditation.

Emboldened by the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, Sr. Elaine began studying Zen to know the Japanese people better and continued it as a personal discipline in the development of her own spirituality.

For several years, she lived with cloistered Rinzai Buddhist nuns in Kyoto in a gruelling regimen of 10 hours of *zazen*, or sitting meditation, each day beginning at precisely 3:05 a.m. “Real samurai stuff,” she called it.

Dispatched to the Philippines in 1976 to pursue animal husbandry, she opened a Zen centre in Manila and received word through underground channels that a prisoner who had been tortured under the Ferdinand Marcos regime requested she visit.

She led meditation sessions with him and a dozen other inmates at the hellish Bago Bantay detention centre in Quezon City, and soon noticed that the violent trembling the men were experiencing from electric shock torture had eased.

Back in Japan in 1980, the famous Zen master Yamada Koun Roshi, impressed with his former pupil’s depth of meditation and knowledge of koans – riddle-like statements meant to demonstrate the limits of the analytic mind – invested Sr. Elaine into the highest stratum of the stream of Zen she practised, Sanbo Kyodan, and conferred on her the title of “roshi” (“master” or “old teacher”). She was also given a Zen name, “Ko Un Ang” – roughly, “Little Hermitage of a Cloud of Light.” But the master “would not let me be anything else but a Catholic,” she recalled in later interviews.



She authored six books, among them, *Teaching Zen to Christians*.

DEBORAH BAIC/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

She was in rarefied company, believed to be the first Canadian and among a small number of Westerners to become a Zen master. She was aware of only three other

Roman Catholic nuns in the world to attain the title.

Her reputation drew her to Britain, where for six years she directed the Prison Phoenix Trust, which aids prisoners through meditation and yoga. Sr. Elaine organized meditation workshops in some 90 jails across the country and personally led a session at Northern Ireland's notorious Maze prison with 18 high-ranking members of the Irish Republican Army.

She kept it simple in prisons because she said many inmates were too psychologically unhealthy to handle the rigours of Zen.

Still, the program won plaudits for effecting noticeable drops in inmates' tension levels, improvements in their concentration, sociability, and self-esteem, and ultimately, reduced prison violence. As one London convict wrote about his experience: "I have become free even in prison. I might also say prison is the perfect monastery."

The actor Jeremy Irons was a patron of the trust and remained good friends with Sr. Elaine.

She was "one of the very few truly remarkable people I have met," Mr. Irons told *The Globe* by e-mail. "She involved me with the Prison Phoenix Trust in the U.K., went on to lead me in Zen meditation in County Clare, Ireland, and badgered me into creating a fundraising concert for Freeing the Human Spirit in Toronto [in 2007] along with [Canadian singer-songwriter] Kate McGarrigle."

Mr. Irons compared Sr. Elaine to Vietnam War-era dissident Catholic priest Daniel Berrigan. "The universal God shone through her and through her work, and I believe she changed everyone with whom she came into contact for the better."

But the work in Britain proved too much and she returned to her native Canada in the early 2000s, officially to retire. Instead, she launched Freeing the Human Spirit. This time, though, she encountered resistance from correctional officials, some of whom expressed bias toward yoga. One of them cited the Bible's warning

that if you get rid of one devil, seven others will take its place. “I’m not a trained theologian or biblical scholar,” Sr. Elaine explained to Religion News Service in 2005, “but I know from my own experience that’s not what happens.”

She authored six books, among them, *Teaching Zen to Christians*. The citation on her 2001 Order of Canada was simple enough: “She offers those who are incarcerated a path to hope and peace.” Sr. Elaine retired in 2013 and turned *Freeing the Human Spirit* over to the John Howard Society.

Her departure, coupled with volunteer fatigue and challenges for all small charities, meant that by 2019, the program was active in only 10 Canadian prisons, still offering eight-week courses in simple yoga postures and 30 minutes of meditation, with special attention given to breathing and posture.

The COVID-19 pandemic nearly shut down the group’s work, said its executive director, Cathy Manuel. Except for the Warkworth and Millhaven penitentiaries in Ontario, *Freeing the Human Spirit* has not had a physical presence in any institution since April 2020. However, a DVD was produced and distributed in 50 federal institutions across Canada to keep inmates engaged in the practice.

Asked for a comment, Toronto’s Roman Catholic archdiocese said: “We pray for Sr. Elaine and all those who mourn her loss, giving thanks for a life of service to others.” In years past, the archdiocese noted that Sr. Elaine was “in good standing” and “involved in important prison ministry, as well as using meditation methods for her outreach.” There was nothing “in the files” about her non-Catholic approach.

Sr. Elaine shrugged off criticism, sometimes barbed, that a Catholic nun had publicly embraced another spiritual practice. For one thing, she insisted she knew very little about Buddhism. “I’m not studying a philosophy,” she told *Tricycle*. “I’m just doing something that requires no thought. It just takes time – and silence.” For her, meditation was a garbage collector. “The inner garbage gradually just disappears. There’s no philosophy there at all. There’s no philosophy in peace.”

She was predeceased by her siblings and leaves many nieces and nephews, a community of Zen and yoga instructors, and nuns at Our Lady's Missionaries.