

BUDDHISTS AND CHRISTIANS IN CONVERSATION

by Mark G. Press

Introduction

“Honey, we have new neighbors.” What happens when the new neighbor is from another world religion? Today Buddhists and Christians have many opportunities to encounter one another -- including, sometimes, over the back fence. The movement of the world’s economic center toward the Pacific Rim countries, the ongoing and growing relationships between Japan and China and the U.S. in trade markets, the growth of Eastern countries’ investments in the United States, and other indicators show the critical need for Christians and Buddhists to be prepared to communicate with one another the world over. Part of growing awareness includes a growing understanding of the history, theology and practice of each other’s religion. It is the purpose of this paper to explore Buddhism from the vantage point of Christian faith, to encourage greater understanding and willingness to interact.

I. Foundations of Buddhism

Buddhism had its origins in the sixth century B.C. in India and is closely linked with its founder as the key teacher of the tradition even today. Gautama (later to be known as the “Buddha”) was probably born around 563 B.C. in the borderland between India and Nepal. Up to the age of 29, most scholars suggest, Gautama lived the life of a prince. Allegedly, in a moment of revelation he received insight into the transitory character of all things. Despite his father’s attempts to keep him closed up inside the palace walls, the young Gautama “took four trips in all and, despite his father’s efforts to shield his eyes, saw four thought-provoking sights: an aged man, a man suffering in agony from a

hideous disease, a corpse, and finally an old wandering monk who appeared content.” (Ellwood, 120)

These images left an unshakeable impression on young Gautama’s mind.

In the course of this search, Gautama experienced some discouragement, but his persistence finally paid off:

Purchasing a pallet of straw from a farmer, he seated himself on it under a huge fig tree. He placed his hand firmly to the ground and swore by the good earth itself that he would not stir from that spot until he attained complete and final enlightenment...His consciousness refined itself by moving through four stages of trance...He also passed through several stages of awareness. First, he saw all of his previous existences. Then, he saw the previous lives, the interlocking deaths and rebirths, of all beings, and he grasped the karmic forces at work; the universe became like a mirror to him. Finally, he saw with full understanding what principles underlay this web and how extrication from it is possible...The Four Noble Truths...appeared in his mind...Siddhartha Gautama was now a Buddha, an ‘Enlightened One,’ or ‘One who is awake.’” (Ellwood, 120-121)

After a number of years and much meditation, Gautama began to expound “Four Noble Truths” which he was to proclaim for the remainder of his life. These include: 1) *Dukkha*: Life is unsatisfactory and full of suffering; 2) *Samudaya*: Suffering is caused by people’s greed and craving for the experience of the senses and for the process of becoming and existing in an illusory world; 3) *Nirodha*: If people overcame their selfish desires, their craving for existence, then *dukkha* or craving would disappear; and 4) The solution is open to humans, and it is found by their following the Middle Way laid down in the Eightfold Path. That Eightfold Path is outlined as follows: Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Awareness, Right Concentration - in this order, based on three principles of *Samadhi* (concentration), *Panna* (wisdom), and *Sila* (morality).

Today Buddhism is found in two primary expressions: Mahayana Buddhism, found predominantly in northern Asia (also known as the “Greater Vessel”) and Theravada Buddhism, found

primarily in southern Asia and called the “Lesser Vehicle.” This paper focuses its attention upon Mahayana Buddhism, in which the figure of the bodhisattva plays a major role.

II. World view of the Buddhist

Buddhism differs from Christianity in its predominantly psychological approach to religious faith. “Buddhism is perhaps the highest expression of a comprehensive non-revealed religion...solely elaborated by a rational analysis of human nature and experience in history. This analysis is not just philosophical; it is more psychological -- a deeply perceptive laying-bare of human experience and the consequences thereof.” (Fernando, 89) However, this is not to imply that Buddhism is mystic in its approach. Ellwood corrects this wrong idea which some may have, “Buddhist thought is not a vague diffuse mysticism but a sharp precise intellectualism, which delights in hard logic and numerical lists of categories.” (Ellwood, 119) In this, Buddhism differs radically from Hinduism or other more mystical approaches to religious expression.

Vital to the Buddhist world view is the non-existence of things, even of the self. This indeed makes communication rather difficult, as one is never quite sure whether one is actually involved in communicating (since neither the sender nor the receiver is believed to have existence in the proper sense).

There are several rather divergent interpretations of Buddhist doctrine. So much is this the case that one is hard-pressed to identify Buddhism as either pantheistic or atheistic. The treatment afforded to God varies widely in Buddhist thought. However, it seems that all Buddhists agree on the insistence that people have no business speaking meaningfully about God. Dhavomony even takes this back to the

founder himself, “The Buddha does not exactly deny the existence of a personal God but is not really interested in him.” (Dhavomony, 45)

Buddhism, particularly in its Zen form, as it seeks to unpack the correct conception of the ultimate, gives voice to definitively pantheist teaching (in the sense which Clark and Geisler label “permeational pantheism”). “Suzuki quotes a text attributed to Bodhidharma (founder of Zen Buddhism): ‘If you want to seek the Buddha, you ought to see into your own Nature, which is the Buddha himself...This Nature is the Mind, and the Mind is the Buddha, and the Buddha is the Way, and the Way is Zen.’ Here we find the basic teaching that all reality is one, for all possesses the Buddha-nature.” (Clark & Geisler, 22) Thus the understanding of God tends toward pantheism, though many Buddhists would be just as comfortable with having their ideas labeled as atheistic.

Vital to Buddhism as a whole, and to Mahayanist Buddhism in particular, is the goal of salvation. However, this is not seen as some final paradise of bliss as expressed in Christian thought. Rather, the Buddhist envisions salvation as a level of consciousness or a state of realization which is to be achieved (at least in classical Buddhist tradition) through meditation and mental effort.

Salvation and its achievement receive a somewhat more familiar (at least for the Christian) twist in Buddhism as expressed in Japan. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the Kamakura period of Japanese culture saw the rise of three new movements of Buddhism: Pure Land, Zen and Nichiren. Salvation is available, not just to the special group of people who would seek it through monastic obedience and devotion, but to the common person. Buddhahood is seen as being within the reach of everyone. Mahayanistic teaching thus represents a “democratization” of Buddhist thought.

The source of Buddhist thought includes “the *tripitaka*, the scriptures in the Pali language

dealing with the Buddha's life and teaching and monastic rules accepted by the Theravadins, as well as a growing body of Sanskrit scriptures called *sutras*." (Ellwood, 136)

With regard to the world, the Buddhist takes a very skeptical approach, not in the sense of a negative view of what might be considered reality, but in the sense of questioning basic reality itself. The idea of the "Void" becomes significant in the Buddhist world view. "The Buddhist 'emptiness' is not nothingness." (Bareau, 7) This Void is a vital part of the Buddhist perspective on the world around. It also embodies well the typically detached attitude of the Buddhist toward the world of illusion in which all people "reside."

Attitudes toward the Buddha himself vary somewhat in the two main Buddhist traditions. "In Theravada Buddhism, the historical Buddha is regarded as a perfect man...In the Mahayana he is interpreted as the projection or manifestation of the Absolute. He is an essence with ultimate being but an illusion in his frail mortal frame." (Dhavomony, 47) Since mortality is itself an illusion (along with existence), once again the Buddhist finds "detachment" from whatever others might view as reality.

III. Opening Conversation Between Christians and Buddhists

A. A Word of Caution

It is necessary in seeking understanding not to assume that any particular Buddhist shares any but the most general outline of Buddhist teaching as outlined here or in other materials. Reading of the Buddhist scriptures will not inform a person as to what this or that individual actually believes and practices, since there is such wide variety (even in the basic understanding of God, as we have already seen), both within the Buddhist scriptures themselves and in the use and understanding of them. It is instructive that, even though Buddhism became a vital force in Japanese society already in the first millennium of this era, the Buddhist scriptures were not even translated into Japanese until this century. (Heinemann, 213) Thus the Buddhism absorbed by much of Japanese society may have little resemblance to “official” Buddhist teaching. It will be essential to speak and dialogue with a desire to understand this particular person’s understanding and connections with his religious roots. With that caveat in mind, the discussion moves to the issue of how Christians and Buddhists may be able to speak with one another, especially those Buddhists who identify with the Mahayana line of Buddhism.

B. Common ground between Buddhists and Christians

The question now is where, given their differing world views, Christians and Buddhists might find some common ground of understanding. This would seem more difficult with Buddhism than with many other religions. However, Christians believe God has not left Himself without witness, even in the most surprising places. One of the things that might be done in dialogue with Buddhists is to compare the witness of the Bible to the Buddhist “catechism.” This can be done with respect to the Eightfold

Path and the Four Noble Truths, each of which would have significant parallels in the biblical record.

It would seem that, in conversation with the Mahayana Buddhist, there may be some paths accessible which might not be open in dialogue with the Theravadins. For example, the actual historicity of the religious figurehead of the Buddha may come into play. “To the Theravadins the historical Buddha is only the teacher of the truth and the historicity of the Buddha itself is of little consequence...But for the Mahayanists the Buddha, the awakened one, is the concrete realization of the truth which cannot be reduced to any clear-cut formula.” (Vos, 50-51) While the Mahayanist sees the Buddha as the “concrete realization of the truth,” Jesus Christ presents Himself as “the Truth,” Christian confession sees Him as the concrete embodiment of God’s Word and God’s truth. Thus the concept of incarnation may present some common ground for discussion with the Mahayanist. Of course, the “incarnation” of the Buddha would not be as complete and identified with the eternal as in Christian teaching regarding the coming of the Son of God into human flesh.

Concern for peace and order within the social world is also a joint concern for the Buddhist and the Christian, even if they come at the achievement of that peace and order in totally different ways. One of the critiques which Christianity makes of Buddhism is that there seems to be no basis for ethics or morality, since all beings are illusory. However, when one examines the Buddhist social order, one finds in general a very orderly and disciplined people. “Buddhism dispels the Christian fear that unless there is a binding law connected with sanctions of a supernatural order the moral law cannot be maintained.” (Fernando, 93) What this would suggest is that, from a Christian vantage point, the moral law is written on the hearts of people of every culture, and that certain social and religious sanctions may provide for a just social structure, even apart from the issue of ultimate religious truth.

In addition, one common ground between Buddhism and Christianity is that both have been proven to be effective missionary orders. This is the case with Christianity, in that its power for adaptability has been more noted. But Buddhism has ranged far and wide in its spread through the world as well. Far from the idea of certain religions that faith is private and not just personal and is to be kept to oneself, the Buddhist would agree that the truth needs to be proclaimed widely.

The key concept this paper suggests for mutual conversation between Buddhists and Christians is the concept of the “bodhisattva.” The bodhisattva is a figure of power and grace. He is an enlightened being who has made a conscious decision to remain in the world of illusion in order to assist poor, benighted persons to move ahead in their own salvation. He dwells both in Nirvana and in this world. “The Sanskrit term *bodhisattva* is composed of two words, *bodhi* and *sattva*. *Bodhi* is derived from the verbal root *budh*, meaning ‘wake’ so that *bodhi* is the state of being awake...The second component of the term, *sattva* has a wider range of meanings...It can mean ‘sentient being,’ in which the compound *bodhisattva* would be read as ‘a being [seeking] enlightenment.’” (Lopez & Rockefeller, 24) For the bodhisattva, this search for enlightenment takes the form of self-giving service to others.

In the book *Christ and the Bodhisattva*, Lopez and Rockefeller speak of the original requirements to become a bodhisattva, namely that “in the lifetime in which the vow to achieve Buddhahood is made, the person must be a male, must have the ability to achieve nirvana in that lifetime, must be a renunciate, must make the vow in the presence of a living Buddha, and must possess a wide variety of supernormal powers, such as the ability to fly, walk on water, and to walk through walls.” (Lopez & Rockefeller, 27) However, even though it may be a temporally longer path, the Mahayana

faith opened up the possibility of being bodhisattva to any who are capable of feeling compassion for the world's sufferings, even if that person has to wait until one of the lifetimes in which reincarnation as a male takes place.

Ellwood tells us that, for the Mahayanist, “everyone is actually an unrealized Buddha...In all of this the key figure is the bodhisattva...The bodhisattva is on the way to Buddhahood but holds back at its very threshold out of compassion for the countless beings still in ignorance and suffering.” (Ellwood, 137) Unable to change karma, still the bodhisattva’s understanding of karmic energy can benefit any being. “The bodhisattva can work with subtlety and skill to bring one to make new resolutions through wise teaching, edifying experiences, and a whiff of the wonder of the other side.” (Ellwood, 143) Since there are countless varieties of bodhisattvas (and since the potential for this sort of existence lies within each being), some have called Mahayana Buddhism the “multimedia approach” to salvation within Buddhism.

Regarding what the bodhisattva actually does on his path to Buddhahood, the following list of focal points is found (Lopez & Rockefeller, 221-225):

- Cultivate equanimity.
- Recognize all beings as your dearest friend.
- Be mindful of the kindness of other beings.
- Special mindfulness of kindness referring to basic needs.
- Be intent on repaying that kindness.
- Equalizing of self and others.
- Reflect on the disadvantages of self-cherishing.
- Reflect on the advantages of cherishing others.
- Exchanging self and other.
- Take into yourself others’ suffering with an attitude of compassion.
- Give away your own happiness to others with an attitude of love.
- Special resolve: developing will to work to bring about removal of all sufferings.

Obviously, many parallels exist between this list and the call to servanthood which is issued in the teachings of Jesus Christ, who calls all people to love others as they love themselves.

C. Tension points between Buddhism and Christianity

Obviously a key point of disagreement would be with regard to the historic and unique role of Jesus Christ in the issue of salvation. Consider Dhavomony's words: "Christianity has always been faith in Christ and his saving message, seeking an understanding of its doctrine...On the contrary Buddhism is first of all a doctrine, a wisdom, which generates faith in the doctrine...To a Buddhist history is of little consequence." (Dhavomony, 52)

In addition, the very meaning of salvation itself is vastly different for the two faiths. "Salvation means [for the Buddhist] liberation from the round of existence, from ignorance and suffering." (Dhavomony, 53) This is quite different from Christian teaching regarding man's sinful condition (due to his rebellious nature, not to his lack of knowledge) and to the "escape" which is available through God's gift of grace and forgiveness in connection with the work of Jesus Christ.

Fernando points out additional tension points, beginning with the fact that Buddhism is a psychological belief. "Christianity, being a revealed religion, necessarily demands faith -- faith in the God who reveals and manifests himself...Buddhism does not admit the notion of a personal God, a God who creates, redeems and loves...In contrast, in Christianity, Christ is the expression and manifestation of the transcendent, omnipotent God, who is man's creator and final end." (Fernando, 90) Here are some key points which dare not be ignored in deeper discussions with Buddhists: Christianity's historical character, the place of faith, and the foundation belief in a real, personal God who interacts with real,

personal beings. These factors usher in some extreme differences with the Buddhists in regard to the status of women, family, and the value of the body.

Neill points out three Christian assumptions which impinge on Christian interface with Buddhism:

1) First is the principle of contingency or contingent being, that is, the idea that (at least in general, certain experiences excepted) the things which are perceived as having existence (including the self) actually exist. 2) Secondly there is the principle of purpose, which states that there is some end or goal toward which things are moving. 3) Finally Christians insist on the principle of history, the teaching that things really do happen in a time-space continuum. These points (philosophical lynch-pins for the Christian no proclamation) need to be given careful consideration in conversation with Buddhists.

Attention is now turned upon the Buddhist idea of self or being:

Buddhism teaches that instead of being a 'self,' in the sense of a separate enduring 'soul' stuck in a body, we are all compounds made up of several different constituents. The five parts that make up a human being are called *skandhas*; the word skandha means 'bundle' and reminds us that these constituents themselves are collocations of dharmas, the pointlike primary particles that flash out of the void. The human skandhas are form (the physical shape), the feelings, the perceptions (the 'picture' the mind forms out of data transmitted by the sense organs), the inherent impulses (karmic dispositions), and the background consciousness. Note that both physical and psychological entities are brought together. The problem is that when these five entities get together, they interact in such a way as to make the 'person' think of herself as a separate individual. (Ellwood, 128)

In contrast to this, Christian belief postulates a reality which has been created by God that humans experience as the self. This self has been created for relationship, with God and with other people, who are real selves as well. Relationship, not suffering, dominates man's purpose. Christian teaching regarding the soul has not been univocal, except with regard to the key point: Humans are a

physical and spiritual beings, and the constituent elements are essential to their existence. This existence God plans to be eternal - in terms of quality of life as well as quantity. And because we have sought to do things our own way (the Fall), we have derailed His plan, which He has not discarded. Rather He has planned to make it possible for us to live for Him and with Him eternally through the atoning death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.

How does the Buddhist explain the teaching of the soul? One man writes this way: “the desire [Buddhist ‘craving’] for an immortal life (*Bhavatanha*) might prompt one to believe and find security in the idea of an eternal soul. Also, the Buddha points out that there is another form of desire at work here. It is the desire and attachment for the consciousness and its types.” (Dharmasiri, 7) Here is a point which brings us face to face with the formal principle at work within these two religions. Buddhists take as their formal principle (even above their own scriptures, one might say) logic and reason. The Christian has another authority beyond his own mind and thought processes, namely the Holy Bible, which he claims is God’s Holy Word. Christ Himself in Holy Writ proclaims the existence of man in body and spirit. Even if it doesn’t fit our logical categories, still the Christian takes reason captive to the Word in this situation.

Dialogue with Buddhists issues in a variety of questions to be raised, some of which are outlined by S. Neill: 1) Can elimination of the Self be achieved as completely and easily as some Buddhists seem to think? 2) What is the ultimate origin of the skandhas? 3) Does evidence support the view that man can be his own savior? 4) Why should the aspirant after salvation be concerned about other sentient beings, if they are as much an illusion as he is? 5) Why should the Bodhisattva’s noble ideals be followed and self-giving be so noble (especially since this bodhisattva is so much a “foreign body” in

Buddhist thinking)? 6) Why start with suffering, “the worst of all things,” as the takeoff point for one’s religious considerations? (Neill, 120f.)

One matter worth noting is that the tension points which Christians see will often not be seen as tension points from the Buddhist’s perspective. There is wide variety in teaching within Buddhism, and their attitude toward other religions is much more syncretic than the Christian approach. "Tolerance is shown in the co-existence of Shinto, Buddhism, Confucianism (and in modern times also Christianity), all of which are felt by the Japanese to be harmoniously compatible. The great majority of the Japanese are Buddhists and Shintoists at the same time. In modern times there were and still are people who do not feel the slightest incompatibility between Christianity and traditional Japanese religion." (Heinemann, 215) Thus in our discussions with Buddhists, we may expect some indifference to what we see as key points of difference.

Considering in more detail the image of the bodhisattva highlights some tension points which its teaching raises vis a vis the Christ of Christian doctrine. One of the key differences is that the bodhisattva teaching, while it holds out a promise of release, the path is hardly a walk through the park. And it is only workable within the structure of reincarnation. “Having made the vow to become a Buddha, the Bodhisattva sets out on the long and arduous path to Buddhahood, a path said to encompass three periods of countless eons, variously reckoned in Indian texts as lasting as little as 960 million years to as much as $3 \times 10^{51} \times 320 \times 10^6$ years...Over the course of the path, the Bodhisattva accumulates the merit and wisdom that will fructify as Buddhahood.” (Lopez & Rockefeller, 25) Obviously, the decision to approach Buddhahood through the bodhisattva path is not one to be taken lightly!

At the same time, the Christian faith has the advantage of offering salvation which is available (today!) to each person through faith in God's chosen Messiah. Man's effort and trial accomplishes neither his own salvation, nor that of others. And salvation does not need to wait for the endless eons of the cycle of rebirth. Rather, through the rebirth of Baptism, the Christian is reborn into life in the family of God. And his life is new each day through the renewing power of repentance and faith in the living Savior.

This point is critical. The Christian Hero or Savior (dare we say Bodhisattva?) is not some figure of the past, nor is He one who needs to suffer again and again, over and over in some endless cycle. No, Scripture tells us, "He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood" (Heb. 9:12). By virtue of the Godhead assuming our humanity, Christ's sacrifice was sufficient for a whole world of sin and suffering.

And what about suffering? I can say it no better than Neill has put it:

Why suffer? That is the ultimate question. It comes to sharp and challenging expression in the contrast between the serene and passionless Buddha and the tortured figure on the Cross. In Jesus we see One who looked at suffering with eyes as clear and calm as those of the Buddha. He saw no reason to reject it, to refuse it, to eliminate it. He took it into himself and felt the fullness of its bitterness and horror; by the grace of God he tasted death for every man. Others suffer; he will suffer with them and for them, and will go on suffering till the end of time. But he does not believe that suffering is wholly evil; by the power of God it can be transformed into a redemptive miracle. Suffering is not an obstacle to deliverance; it can become part of deliverance itself...The Buddhist ideal is that of passionless benevolence. The Christian ideal is that of compassion. (Neill, 123-124)

If the key to reality and life is that a person assumes suffering from the standpoint of some sort of "passionless benevolence," as the detachment from reality, as the penalty of his karma being worked

out in an endless repetition of suffering, then the bodhisattva of Buddhism offers the answer to life. But if the answer to suffering is found in a personal God who comes to earth to share mankind's suffering and to point beyond the suffering to eternal glory, then one will cast his lot with Jesus, the Christ.

D. Area of greatest difficulty in communication between Christians and Buddhists

Perhaps the single most difficult thing in communicating the Christian Gospel to the Buddhist would be moving beyond the idea of suffering as caused by faulty thinking to the role of sin in bringing about the evil and suffering which we encounter. This engages many other related teachings, including the reality of personhood, the existence and personality of God, issues surrounding creation, the nature of salvation, and many others. However, Buddhist thinking itself may also present some interesting entrees into the conversation about suffering and evil.

Since the concept of suffering was the Buddha's takeoff point, it would seem that this understanding is a critical matter in communicating Christ to the Buddhist. However, there may be some assistance given in the role of the bodhisattva. This enigmatic figure may be seen to express some of the self-giving and self-renunciation which is mirrored in the Christ of Calvary. The life of cross-bearing to which Jesus calls His people will also be a vital part of discipleship, not just for those who wish to do "works of supererogation," as does the bodhisattva, but for each and every follower of Christ, whose suffering puts His followers into the role of servant to the suffering people of the world as He insists that His disciples "pick up their cross daily."

It will not be in the process of argument and debate that the most ground will be gained with the Buddhists, who are often well-trained in debate and philosophical argumentation. But if the life of

genuine love and service, grounded in the simple yet profound act of the Son of God's giving of His life for His people's welfare, can be seen in people's daily lives, this may touch the heart of the Buddhist and, combined with the witness to the truth of the Word, bring him to the enlightenment which only the Spirit of God can truly bring.

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