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# Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

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these organizations are sponsored and supported by particular governments or those groups promoting certain religio-political ideologies. The Muslim masses in general do not trust their rulers and governments, nor do they show any respect to the religious bodies appointed by the governments. Similarly, the majority does not agree with many so-called activist Muslim organizations. This creates one of the most serious questions for Muslim participants in Christian-Muslim dialogue in general and Catholic-Muslim dialogue in particular.

James Fredericks

## Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

*By acknowledging their differences  
and discovering similarities,  
Buddhists and Christians can learn  
to live as neighbors and bestow  
blessings on each other.*

On my desk stands a picture of the Dalai Lama, seated on the ground in meditation in the midst of a graveyard. He sits before a simple cross over which he has draped, with great reverence, a *kata*, a scarf that Tibetans place over the shoulders of those they wish to honor. The cross marks the grave of Thomas Merton, outside the chapel of the Trappist monastery in Gethsemani, Kentucky. Now we can say that the *kata* marks Thomas Merton's grave as well. The Dalai Lama had come to Gethsemani in 1993 to honor this Catholic monk whom he had met in India twenty-five years before.

The Dalai Lama's journey to Gethsemani began with his meeting with Thomas Merton in 1968, which suggested to him that Buddhists could learn from the monastic and contemplative tradition of Catholic Christianity. At the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1993, the Dalai Lama and other Buddhist leaders met with members of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue for a conversation, "Kenosis and Shunyata." Afterward, the Dalai Lama suggested a further meeting of Buddhist and Catholic monastics. What better place to hold such a meeting than in Merton's own monastery in Kentucky?

In 1968, Merton made the long journey to Asia where he met the young Dalai Lama and spoke with him for several days. Merton thought this Buddhist monk was "a very impressive person, deeply concerned about the contemplative life, and also very learned." In Merton's view, the two monks "clicked" and became "good friends." Merton died in Bangkok soon afterward. In placing the *kata* over Merton's cross, the Dalai Lama was honoring not only a personal friend, but also a Christian monk who had befriended Buddhism itself. As I gaze at the picture, I see two friends, two monks and two religions. The *kata* brings out the stark simplicity of the cross.

Not all Buddhists, of course, have thought of the cross of Christ as a fitting place to meditate. D. T. Suzuki, an early exponent of Zen Buddhism in the West, looked on the figure of the crucified Christ as a sign of the great gulf that separates Christians from Buddhists. In contrast to the Buddha seated calmly in meditation, "Christ hangs helpless, full of sadness on the vertically erected cross." Suzuki struggled to understand how this image of the embrace of suffering could have any religious significance. "Could not the idea of oneness [with Christ] be realized in some other way, rationally, more humanely, less militantly, and less violently?" Despite these difficulties, Suzuki, in his own way, was a friend to Christianity, like the Dalai Lama today. Christians should count themselves lucky to have such friends.

#### GETTING TO DIALOGUE

Merton went to Asia in part to participate in a dialogue of Buddhist and Christian monks held in Bangkok. This meeting itself was in response to the teachings of the recently completed Vatican Council. The Council document on other religious traditions, *Nostra Aetate*, famously taught: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions." Even before the end of the Council, Paul VI established a new secretariat to coordinate the Catholic church's dialogue with other believers. Today this secretariat has become the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue headed by Cardinal Arinze.

Pope John Paul II called Roman Catholics to observe the new millennium by entering into dialogue with their neighbors who follow

other religious paths. This appeal was not a sudden or random thought. Since his first encyclical, this Pope has been articulating a theological vision of other religions that makes dialogue in depth not only possible, but a necessary part of the church's service to the world. Over the years, the Pope has returned repeatedly to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, especially *Gaudium et Spes* 22, which reminds us that the Spirit of God is at work in the world universally, not only within Christian religion. The Pope's vision of other religious traditions laid down the foundation for his gathering with religious leaders from around the world in Assisi on October 27, 1986, and again on January 24, 2002, for a World Day of Prayer for Peace.

Roman Catholics who want to enter into friendships with Buddhists and carry on dialogues with them would be well advised to avoid two extremes. On the one hand, there is the tendency to stress the uniqueness of Christianity as an unprecedented revelation. This approach can obscure the real similarities that link Christianity with Buddhism. On the other hand, there is a tendency to think of both Buddhism and Christianity (and the other religious paths as well) as merely different ways of interpreting the same ultimate reality. This view of religious diversity often explains the many differences between Buddhism and Christianity as merely apparent. "Many paths lead to the top of Mount Fuji," I am often told, "but there is only one view at the top." The problem with this approach is that it tends to obscure the real differences that distinguish Christianity and Buddhism as distinct religions. Even worse, this approach suggests that the differences that distinguish Buddhists and Christians are theologically and spiritually uninteresting. Buddhism and Christianity are neither wholly different, such that Buddhists and Christians cannot communicate with one another, nor wholly similar, such that dialoguing with one another would be a waste of time.

This being the case, why are these extreme views of religions, including Buddhism and Christianity so popular? Since Buddhism is similar in significant ways to Christianity, Buddhists and Christians can talk with one another. Since Buddhism differs from Christianity in significant ways, Buddhists and Christians need to talk with one another. Herein lies the basis for a dialogue with Buddhists that is both enriching and challenging.

### BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue speaks of various kinds of dialogue. The "dialogue of life" has to do with the daily lives of Buddhists and Christians and the promotion of better relations between these two religious communities. This kind of dialogue happens when members of a local Catholic parish and a Buddhist temple get together and begin to learn about one another as neighbors. This form of dialogue may turn out to be the most challenging and enriching for Christians. The "dialogue of cooperation and social justice" has to do with Buddhist and Christian groups coming together to work mutually for the betterment of society. The dialogue of Daniel Berrigan, a Jesuit priest, and Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, on Christian activism and "engaged Buddhism" is a good example. The "dialogue of scholars and experts" has to do with the meeting of Christian and Buddhist theologians and their discussions of religious doctrines. My attempts to think in new ways about Christianity in light of Buddhist teachings would be an example of this kind of dialogue. Finally, there is the "dialogue of religious experience." In this form of dialogue, Christians and Buddhists come together to learn about one another's spiritual lives and practices. Not surprisingly, Buddhist and Christian monastics have taken a leadership role in this area.

Hospitality toward visitors is a time-honored tradition in both Christian and Buddhist monasteries. Therefore, a monastery is a natural place for Christians and Buddhists to welcome one another in friendship. In 1974, Rembert Weakland, then the Abbot Primate of the Benedictines, was asked by Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli of the Vatican to extend hospitality to Buddhist monks so that discussions of the spiritual life might continue with more intensity. Meetings of Christian and Buddhist monastics had already taken place in Bangkok (1968) and Bangalore (1973). Today, the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) has become one of the most active and fruitful ways in which Buddhists and Christians learn from one another. Monks and nuns from both religions regularly take up residence in each other's monasteries as honored guests. Hospitality, of course, takes work. Hospitality for a visitor from another religious tradition takes a great deal of work. Materials explaining the Catholic Mass, for

example, had to be prepared for Buddhist visitors. Similarly, the basics of Buddhist monastic customs and rituals had to be explained to Catholics.

Many of the participants in the 1996 Gethsemani Encounter have said that this gathering marked the beginning of a new level of sophistication for the MID. At Gethsemani, monastics shared in depth about holiness and enlightenment, Buddhist meditation practices and the Christian contemplative life, the stages of the spiritual life and religious practice, the role of spiritual guides in both traditions, as well as the relationship between monastic life and social responsibility. The Buddhist participants were especially interested in the Catholic monastic practice of *lectio divina*.

Of course, Buddhism's contribution to Christian spirituality is not confined to dialogues among monks. Koun Yamada, a Zen Buddhist master who practiced in Kamakura, Japan, was the leader of a Zen lineage called Sanbo Kyodan. Yamada Roshi is also the teacher of several Catholics who have now become Zen teachers in their own right. Robert Kennedy, SJ, was ordained a priest by Cardinal Doi in Tokyo in 1965 and studied Zen with Yamada Roshi in Kamakura. Today he gives retreats to Buddhists and Christians. Father Kennedy's aim is to integrate the Zen spirit into Christian life and prayer so as to "root the faith in the whole person." At the heart of Buddhism lies a spirit of compassion such that Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, is at the service of other religious traditions. Zen does not supplant or weaken Christian faith. Rather, Zen is a devotional style that can be useful to Christians who have a temperament for this kind of asceticism. Zen can be a great blessing for Christians. Thus in his retreats, Father Kennedy speaks of "Zen gifts for Christians." Ben Habito, a Filipino Catholic, studied with Yamada Roshi for many years in Kamakura and received formal Zen transmission from him. Today, he conducts retreats for Buddhist and Christians at the Maria Kannon Zen Center in Dallas and around the world. Father Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle, a Jesuit priest and student of Yamada Roshi, gave retreats to Christians both in Japan and his native Germany. For Koun Yamada's Christian disciples, Zen does not supplant or weaken Christian faith. However, the Zen path is a way of living the spiritual life that may be useful to some Christian believers.

## THE DIALOGUE OF SCHOLARS

Professor Masao Abe, with whom I have worked for over fifteen years, lives now in retirement near Ryoanji, a famous rock garden in Kyoto. Professor Abe has lectured on Zen thought in universities around the world. After studying Buddhism at the University of Kyoto, he went to the United States in order to study Christian theology with Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, before going on to dialogues with Christian theologians such as Thomas Altizer, Langdon Gilkey, Jürgen Moltmann, Schubert Ogden and David Tracy. In 1986, he and John B. Cobb started a "theological encounter group" which brought Buddhist and Christian thinkers together for a series of discussions-in-depth of the basic teachings of both religions. Professor Abe has no illusions about an easy reconciliation of Buddhism with Christianity. Buddhism, especially Zen, and Christian faith are very different. For all their differences, however, he has dedicated his life to bringing these two religions together in hopes of their mutual enrichment.

Once, in Kyoto, Professor Abe recalled the words of his own teacher, Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, who spoke of Zen as the "negation of God's holiness." At the dedication of his Temple, Solomon was moved to say, "Even heaven and the highest heavens cannot contain you, how much less this house which I have built!" Centuries later, standing before the Temple, the prophet Isaiah had a vision of God enthroned within the Holy of Holies: "Holy, holy, holy . . ." Both the king and the prophet are speaking of the awesome transcendence of God and the failure of all created things to contain the mystery of God, whether it be a temple built of stone or the prophet's ability to wrap his imagination around his vision. The holiness of God is experienced in fear and trembling as God's transcendence and "otherness" from creation.

Zen is the negation of this divine otherness, the overcoming of God's transcendence. As such, Zen has no interest in the divine, or better to say, Zen looks on the divine the same way it looks on the perfectly ordinary. Zen certainly does not search for a transcendent God or long for God's Kingdom. Rather, Zen seeks to connect with the ordinary world as it is in its "true suchness" (*shin-nyō*) and its "primordial naturalness" (*jinen-honi*), that is, in the real character

of everything always present prior to the distortions of our egocentric way of living. A life based on ego-driven attachments is a life in which reality is distorted.

In Zen, the beautiful and the ugly, the nonsensical and the commonsensical, as well as the sacred and the profane are all dissolved into what Buddhism calls "emptiness" (*shunyata*). Since all things are empty of any eternal, enduring existence, attachment to anything is foolish. The path of wisdom opens up through the practice of non-attachment. For Professor Abe, this includes non-attachment to God. Since reality itself is thoroughly empty, the ordinary world is not a parable about an eternal Creator dwelling beyond it. "If you meet the Buddha," Zen teaches, "kill the Buddha."

The same advice holds for Solomon's and Isaiah's meetings with God. However, contrary to some of the modern atheisms, the death of God called for by Zen does not entail making the human ego absolute. Instead of enthroning the ego, Zen seeks the "true self" or the "primordial person," prior to our egocentric existence. In Zen's true self, there is no distinction between transcendent and immanent, the holy and quotidian, Creator and creature. There is only a seamless and effortless intimacy of the mind with reality itself. This non-duality of all is what Zen calls "emptiness."

To this, Professor Abe's friend, the theologian Thomas Altizer, answers that if Zen is the negation of the Christian God, then the Christian God must be seen as the negation of Zen. The Christian God is a Jewish God: a God that shows up unannounced and unexpected, that changes the course of history, indeed, a God that dominates history and promises to bring history to a meaningful fulfillment. The God of Christianity is a Creator not to be confused with what has been created. Christians, even with their long tradition of nature-mysticism, cannot understand God as "true suchness" or "emptiness." God is known in God's *magnalia*, the great deeds within history that reveal a transcendent power and otherness at the foundation of creation and as the love and justice directing history.

Therefore, Professor Abe thinks that Christian faith in God is rather different than what Buddhists call "awakening to emptiness." For Christianity, authentic human living comes to be by anchoring the self in the transcendent otherness of the Holy God. This is what

Christians call "faith." For Buddhism, on the other hand, authentic human living is found in what Professor Abe calls the "formless self" beyond the hard and artificial boundaries of the finite ego. As Christians live by means of faith, Buddhists seek to "awaken" to the emptiness of all.

#### PUTTING DIFFERENCES TO WORK

When Professor Abe and I discuss differences such as these, I come away from our conversations with a deeper respect for what is distinct in both religious traditions. This, in itself, is good. Noting differences, however, does not mark the end of Christianity's dialogue with Buddhism, but rather its beginning. How does the distinctiveness of Buddhism help Christians to think about their own religion in new ways?

In recent years I have begun a series of conversations with Ryusei Taketa, a Pure Land Buddhist in Kyoto. Like Zen, the Pure Land path is also rooted deeply in the Buddhist tradition. Pure Land Buddhism is centered on Amida Buddha, a personification of the "true suchness" and "emptiness" about which Professor Abe speaks. Therefore, Ryusei Taketa speaks of Amida Buddha as "the working of emptiness for the benefit of all sentient beings." This is because the true character of Buddhist emptiness is not sheer indifference to everything, but rather compassion. Buddhists practice non-attachment so as to be freed from the ego-attachments which prevent them from connecting more intimately with the world, not to become indifferent to the world's suffering. Pure Land Buddhists symbolize this great truth by means of Amida's Vow. In becoming a Buddha, Amida has vowed to save every sentient being from their ego-driven ignorance. Therefore the true character of the "emptiness" of reality itself is not indifference, but rather the "vow of compassion." In this respect, Pure Land Buddhists speak of Amida's vow as the "Primordial Vow" (*hongan*) that is the true meaning of reality itself.

Ryusei Taketa does not think of Amida Buddha as a god and certainly not as the Christian God who has created all and rules over history. Amida is a personification of pure compassion, the true character of Buddhist emptiness itself. To live by means of faith

in Amida is to live by means of the Primordial Vow. I suspect that this impressive Buddhist truth has much to teach Christians. How does the Pure Land understanding of faith (*shinjin*) as the practice of the Primordial Vow help Christians to think in new and better ways about living by faith in crucified Christ? What is the role of selflessness in Buddhist faith and what does this teach Christians who struggle to understand what it means to pick up one's cross and follow? Buddhist compassion, as we see it in both Zen and Pure Land, is neither entirely different nor entirely the same as Christian love. Here as well, Christians have much to gain from befriending Buddhists and entering into dialogue with them.

#### DHARMA MASTER'S BLESSING

Some years ago, on a rainy and blustery tropical evening, standing on a cliff overlooking the South China Sea, I said goodbye to my friend Dharma Master Shindao, the Abbot of Ling Jiou Monastery on Taiwan. The Dharma Master does not speak English and I do not speak Chinese. We are friends all the same. At Ling Jiou Monastery, the monks practice both Zen and Pure Land Buddhism. They seek to learn from other religious traditions as well. Before getting on the van that would take me to the airport, I asked Dharma Master to give me his blessing. The Abbot held his hand above my head and chanted in classical Chinese for a few moments. Then he smiled and took hold of my hands indicating that he wanted my blessing too. I blessed him with the sign of the cross—the only blessing Dharma Master expected from his Christian friend. In the wind and the rain, on that cliff overlooking the South China Sea, a monk and a priest, a Buddhist and a Christian, with no language in common, blessed one another. This was a good thing for the world to see. Being a blessing to one another is the ultimate aim of the dialogue between Buddhists and Christians.