

**“Christ and the Buddha”**  
**The Rev. Sue Spencer**  
**Unitarian Congregation of Taos, NM**  
**December 16, 2012**

**A Reading:**

*[William Johnston is an Irish Catholic priest who spent some 25 years in Japan. During that time, he became thoroughly immersed in Zen practice. He describes a meeting with his Roshi, or teacher, who asks him about his practice:]*

“Tell me, what about your Zen? What are you doing?”

*[Johnston replies,]* “I’m doing what you, I suppose, would call ‘gedo’ Zen.”

*[The Roshi continues:]* “Very good! Very good! Many Christians do that. But what precisely do you mean by ‘gedo’ Zen?”

“I mean that I am sitting silently in the presence of God without words or thoughts or images or ideas.”

“Your God is everywhere?”

“Yes.”

“And you are wrapped around in God?”

“Yes.”

“And you experience this?”

“Yes.”

“Very good! Very good! Just continue this way. Just keep on. And eventually you will find that God will disappear, and only Johnston-San will remain.”

*[Johnston recalls,]* “This remark shocked me...I said with a smile, ‘God will not disappear. But Johnston might well disappear, and only God will be left.’”

“Yes, yes,” the Roshi answered smilingly. “It’s the same thing. That is what I mean.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From *Speaking of Silence: Christians and Buddhists on the Contemplative Way* (an anthology). Originally appeared in William Johnston, S.J., *Christian Zen*.

**Sermon:**

From time to time, I have the following experience: I'm sitting on an airplane, next to a stranger. Sooner or later, the conversation turns to what we do for a living. When the other person finds out what I do, religion invariably becomes the topic. Often, they haven't heard of Unitarian Universalism, so I tell them a bit about it. After that, at least sometimes, my seat mate will reply: "Well, underneath it all, all religions are basically the same, aren't they?"

That puts me in a quandary. What do I say next? My companion is being good-hearted, and I'd certainly prefer *that* response to being harangued, and told I'm going to hell because I don't believe a certain way. That has also happened, once on a trip in the middle seat, all the way from San Francisco to Honolulu! (Talk about hell...)

Nevertheless, there's a voice inside me crying out, "No, no, you don't understand! If you think all religions are basically the same, you don't know very much about any of them!" Someday, maybe I'll say it. But so far I've just smiled sweetly and returned to my book.

On the face of it, Buddhism and Christianity are perfect examples of religions that are not the same. On the surface, they may even seem like polar opposites. Take, for example, the concept of God. Biblical religion, including classic Christianity, teaches that everything came into being through a creator God, a God who stands outside the creation. That's not the *only* possible Christian position, but it's the one most frequently put forth. In contrast, classical Buddhism is officially atheistic. Everything in the universe is infused with Buddha nature, but there is no God, separate and apart.

As another example, take the promises of salvation offered by the two faiths. Traditional Christianity holds out the possibility of eternal life, usually understood to be the continuation of the personality after death. But Buddhists would be appalled by such a prospect. "Why on earth would anyone want such a thing?" they might ask.

Buddhists – and Hindus, too – believe that life does continue after death, whether we like it or not, in an endless cycle of reincarnation. Westerners don't always understand that for Eastern religion, that's not a good thing – it's a problem! In Buddhism, the goal is to break out of that cycle, to get off the reincarnation carousel. *Nirvana* is release from the cycle - extinction of the ego, like a flame being blown out.

Here's a third example: On the causes of suffering, Buddhism and Christianity have very different ideas. Classical Christianity holds that we suffer because of sin. We go astray because our moral will fails us, and we suffer as a result. Buddhism, in contrast, teaches that the cause of suffering is ignorance. We suffer because we don't understand the true nature of reality, we don't know our inherent Buddha nature.

Interestingly, both traditions have a story of the “Prodigal Son.” In the Christian version from the Gospel of Luke, the son leaves home to separate himself from his father. Sin is separation from the Source. In the Buddhist story, the son leaves home because he’s ignorant about who he is – he’s his father’s heir, but doesn’t know it. Once he wakes up to the truth of his identity, he comes home.

Since the two traditions have different ideas about the origins of suffering, it follows that they might have different ideas about how to end it. Conventional Christianity promises redemption through an external agent – the intervention of a savior or Messiah. Buddhism also promises an end to suffering, but it comes about internally, through enlightenment. This enlightenment includes accepting impermanence, surrendering attachments, and acknowledging that the separate self is an illusion.

Again, different stories illustrate the difference. In the Gospels we have very moving stories of Jesus bringing the dead to life – his friend Lazarus, Jairus’ young daughter. Some take these stories in their literal sense; others find powerful figurative meaning.

In the Buddhist canon, the important story is that of Kisa Gotami, a young mother whose infant son has died. She goes to the Buddha, hoping that he can raise her son from the dead. He tells her that yes, he can do this, but on one condition: that she obtain some mustard seed from a house in which no one has ever died.

Of course, she never finds such a thing. But in going from house to house looking for it, she discovers that she is not alone; death has touched everyone. In making this discovery, Kisa Gotami not only finds consolation, she also learns compassion.

Through exploration of these theological or philosophical differences, we get a sense of two traditions that are quite separate and distinct, even incompatible. And yet, many people who study Buddhism and Christianity discover that the more they study, the more fluid the boundaries become.

For one thing, if we try to make the distinctions, at some point we’re bound to ask, “Okay, *which* Buddhism are we talking about here? And which Christianity?” In speaking of Buddhism, for example, are we speaking of its oldest form, Theravada? Or, are we speaking of Mahayana, that practiced by the majority of Buddhists, or maybe the intense, Tibetan form, Vajrayana?

Similarly with Christianity: What kind are we talking about? Catholic or Protestant? Calvinist or Universalist? Liberal or fundamentalist? Mystical or evangelical? Are we talking about a Christianity that divides the world between the saved and the unsaved? Or an inclusive Christianity, preaching the reign of love and justice here on earth?

Despite what some people would have us believe, Christianity is not a monolithic religion. Could it be that some of its traditions have links with Buddhist tradition? Could there be more powerful connections, sometimes, *across* faith lines than *within* them?

Besides, even seemingly hard-and-fast differences have a way of converging. William Johnston, an Irish Catholic priest who spent 25 years in Japan, gives us one example in today's reading. Another is given by someone who grew up in Japan, Kakichi Kadowacki. He was raised in a Zen Buddhist school, but converted to Christianity while in college, eventually becoming a Catholic priest.

Kadowacki says that, after his conversion, he saw Zen and Christianity as totally different. But the more he learned, the more he "became aware of a strange thing": "I discovered that even though they differ greatly in externals, in their essentials there is a surprising resemblance – a deep resemblance." Kadowacki tells of his journey in a book entitled *Zen and the Bible*.

One of the fundamentals of Zen is "beginner's mind" – letting go of preconceptions and approaching the world with new eyes. It's possible to apply this approach to the teachings of Jesus, looking at the gospels with beginner's mind. When we do so, we may discover that many of Jesus' sayings have a certain Buddhist ring! In fact, we may find that Jesus has his own concept of beginner's mind, enshrined in his teachings about entering the reign of God as a little child.

Similar considerations apply to spiritual teachings about the ego. Buddhism teaches *annata*, the doctrine of "no self." If I understand this teaching correctly, it means that it's an illusion to see the human individual as separate or independent from other beings. It turns out Jesus' teachings get to this as well. For example, he warns against making a show of almsgiving or religiosity. Why? Not because it's "bad" to show off, but because when we do, our ego gets in the way. Those who make a display of virtue "have their own reward" – ego gratification – but miss the real gifts that prayer and generosity bring.

Buddhism teaches non-attachment, the acceptance of impermanence. Suffering comes from clinging, trying to hang on to what is only an illusion. In a similar vein, Jesus says, "Don't be anxious for your life. Live fully in the present, and don't worry about tomorrow."

So far, all these Biblical illustrations have come from the Sermon on the Mount. But the Gospel of John, which speaks in a very different voice, provides examples, too. For example, in his encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus preaches the need to "be born again,." Later in the gospel, he says that a grain of wheat must not remain separate and apart, but rather fall into the earth, lose its husk, and die. This sounds a lot like the Zen teaching of the need "to die the great death and be born again."

Why do I make these connections? Basically to stir our imagination. I'm not suggesting that Jesus was "really" a Buddhist, any more than I would say that Zen masters are "really" Christian. And I'm definitely not trying to say that all religions are basically the same.

Nevertheless, I've become a believer in what Matthew Fox calls "deep ecumenism." Externally, the world's religious traditions look and sound very different – not surprising, since they arise from different cultures. And yet, there's a certain "deep structure" that links them together. Faith traditions draw from different wells – but the wells are connected to the same underground river.

The following story is an illustration of deep ecumenism, and also suggests the dangers of parochialism. It's from another Christian who has straddled religious boundaries, the late Anthony de Mello, a Jesuit from India:

A Christian once visited an Eastern master and said, "Allow me to read you some sentences from the Sermon on the Mount." The Master replied, "I shall listen with pleasure."

The Christian read a few sentences and looked up. The master smiled, and said, "Whoever said these words was truly enlightened."

This pleased the Christian. He read on. The Master interrupted and said, "Those words come from a Savior of humankind."

The Christian was thrilled! He continued to read to the end. The Master then said, "That sermon was pronounced by someone radiant with divinity."

The Christian's joy knew no bounds. He left, determined to return and persuade the guru to become a Christian.

On the way back home, the Christian was surprised to see Jesus standing by the side of the road. "Lord!" he said, his enthusiasm overflowing. "I got that man to confess that you are divine!"

Jesus smiled, and said, "And what good did it do you, except to inflate your Christian ego?"

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Perhaps the Great Enlightenment will come when all people are able to transcend the ego, honoring the tender Christ Child in each person, including themselves.

And perhaps the Salvation of the World will come when all people see the Buddha nature in themselves, in every person, and in every being on the planet.

**Benediction:**

Be ye lamps unto yourselves;  
be your own confidence;  
hold fast to the truth within yourselves;  
as unto the only lamp.

And know that you are the light of the world!  
A city on a hill cannot be hid.  
Let your light shine before others,  
so that they may see your good works,  
and give praise to the Source of all Life.