

# Talks on Buddhism

## II

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### Christianity and Buddhism

First I'd like to say something about "religious consciousness" in general. Now what we call religious consciousness emerges out of a conflict or struggle of major significance in our life. Ordinarily speaking, life itself is nothing but a series of conflicts; life may not go on without one form of conflict or another; we have to be struggling against something. This struggle sometimes comes in the form of a challenge, sometimes in a most threatening manner as to jeopardize our very existence, and we may not be able to proceed without doing something decisive about the problem. It may even come in the form of an idea. In the case of Christianity it is a conflict between God and man, and generally life is depicted by Christians as man's revolt against God, or as man's disobedience of God's commandments. In Confucianism it is the encounter between man and Heaven. The Confucian Heaven, however, unlike the Christian God, is more or less impersonal. But Confucians talk very much about heavenly reason or heavenly way; we are to think and act in conformity with what is thought to be the heavenly Tao.

In Taoism, the term "Heaven" is not so much used. The conflict is between man and Nature, though not nature as it is understood in the West. In the West, nature stands as something threatening, something to be conquered, and is in many ways against the human way. But according to the Lao-tzean understanding or interpretation, Nature means to be

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‘natural’, that is, to follow the natural course of things. Nature is more like harmony itself. Whenever man acts, feels or thinks against this natural course of things, he is liable to meet with disasters of all kinds. So man ought to be in conformity with nature’s way of existing. This is all-important in the Lao-tzean doctrine.

In early Buddhism, we see the conflict as being between what Buddhists call *samsara* and *nirvana*. *Samsara* is “birth-and-death.” According to the old Indian tradition, we go through many rounds of birth and death; one birth, one death is not enough. If we do something bad, something which is not in accord with our conception of what morality is, then we have to reap its results, if not in this life then in the next. The results or effects of what we have done or are doing can never be effaced. According to this way of thinking, we can never escape the consequence or result of what is called our *karma*.

Nevertheless, we continue with our evil ways regardless. Our existence therefore is a succession of pains, sufferings, miseries, calamities of all descriptions, which we don’t like facing. In order to escape this cycle of birth-and-death, we must be doing something to liberate ourselves. Thus the struggle for early Buddhists took the form of either submitting themselves to this eternal cycle of birth-and-death, or escaping this involvement, and being freed, that is, attaining *nirvana*. The early Buddhists, then, tried to escape *samsara* and attain *nirvana*. Once *nirvana* is attained all tribulations or sufferings were thought to stop, and eternal happiness gained.

The later Buddhists, however, conceived the conflict rather differently from their earlier brothers. They saw the problem as one of ignorance and enlightenment. “Ignorance” and “enlightenment”—these terms are somewhat epistemological in expression. But enlightenment is not just an intellectual term. Enlightenment is what takes place at the very basis of our existence. Therefore, it is not an intellectual or philosophical clarification of our existence, but a certain awakening that takes place at the root of our consciousness. The Bible has, “In the beginning there was darkness, and darkness did not know light.” In the same way, underneath what we call our clear field of consciousness lies a certain element of darkness, or unconsciousness. And that darkness is to be enlightened, to be lighted up.

Ordinarily we go on living not knowing exactly what we are doing, groping in the darkness. If we manage to succeed in our various life’s pursuits, that’s fortunate indeed, but in most cases we fail in the end to attain that ultimate peace of mind. When we gain that peace of mind, we

have enlightenment. Or, rather, we can say when we have enlightenment, we have peace of mind; which in Christian terms is eternal life, perhaps. When one attains enlightenment, one becomes conscious of life that goes on eternally. But in fact there is no need to speak of an "eternal" or an "immortal" life; for when we have life, and know what it is, we know it to be eternal or immortal. To say immortal life then would be a kind of tautology. When we know what life is, we also know its meaning.

People nowadays ask after the "significance of life" or "meaning of life." But meaning does not come from anywhere else but from life itself. When we know life itself, we also know life's meaning—the is-ness of life is its meaning.

As I said before, the later Buddhists, calling themselves the Mahayanists, tried to attain enlightenment. Although ignorance can be quite a blessing, it is more often a tragedy. There is a Japanese proverb which says, "*Shiranu ga hotoke*," "To be ignorant is to be Buddha." Here the Buddha sees all that is going on; he sees and yet he does not see. That is to say, ignorance here is not as we generally know it; his ignorance in fact is enlightenment itself. This is the sort of enlightenment a Buddha enjoys. Meanwhile, we are grateful for his merciful ways, for if he saw everything that went on in our minds and tried to expose every corner of our consciousness, our life would be intolerable indeed. It is something of a blessing that we do not know every corner of our consciousness.

Yet another way of expressing this is "enlightenment is attaining freedom." We talk a lot about freedom these days. Especially in politics, we speak of freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of thinking, and so on. But in actual fact no real freedom exists until we have religious realization, that is, unless we have enlightenment itself. Enlightenment frees us.

Christians say "the truth shall make us free"; according to Buddhism, enlightenment frees us. So Christian "truth" is Buddhist "enlightenment," we might say.

What then lies at the basis of ignorance? Ignorance consists in not knowing what we call 'self'. We think we know what the 'self' is, but in fact we do not know what it is. The old Greek saying has, "Know thyself." Although I do not know much about Greek philosophy, from the Buddhist point of view that self is a limited self. The Buddhists try to find what lies underneath the self—yourself, myself, and so on. When we go down deep, the deeper we go, the darker we find that ego to be. On the ordinary plane of

consciousness, we say, 'this is me', 'this is you', 'I am doing this', 'you are doing that'—such kind of ego or not-ego lies merely on the surface of our consciousness. But what lies underneath this surface is darkness itself. This darkness must be somehow illuminated—this is most important. When this happens, when the basis of our ego is lighted up, then we know everything, which then is enlightenment. To express this metaphysically, we might say that with enlightenment, we know what is finite and what is infinite.

In our relative way of thinking, our existence is limited. All that we do, all that we plan, is invariably limited and finite. But this finitude of things is in fact based on the infinite; something infinite which we all yearn to take hold of lies beneath.

When we talk about immortal or eternal life, or about our wish to live with God or in God, and so on, this yearning for that which is beyond limitation, and which goes on eternally is apparent; and though we may not know exactly what that means, we seem to have a certain vague picture of eternity. As Christians would say it is like "seeing through a glass darkly"—we cannot bring it out quite clearly.

So there is something which veils our view and keeps us from eternity, yet at the same time we all go about groping for it. Eternity hovers before our eyes, and we are forever trying to take hold of it. This is at the bottom of our wish for eternity, our wish for an immortal soul. When we arrive at what is infinite, we have solved the religious problem. In the Christian struggle to reach God, man is seen always in revolt against God. The Original Sin always exists keeping him from God. This consciousness of Original Sin, and the awareness of being apart from God—that very consciousness is, positively stated, the Christian's attempt to take hold of the infinite.

In another way, we might be able to say that this struggle or conflict between the finite and the infinite is a struggle between the part and the whole; this is a more intellectual way of putting the problem. Affectively speaking, on the side of the finite, we have pride, conceit, arrogance, and the like, while on the side of the infinite we have humility, passivity, resignation, self-surrender, acceptance, acquiescence and so on. Self-assertion, rebellious spirit, resistance on the side of the finite are admirable in some ways, but rebelliousness is considered evil and generally not liked by religious people.

This conflict, this struggle, can never be brought to an end, for should all struggles end, life would cease to exist. The Christians crave for the

Kingdom of Heaven ruled personally by God; or the Buddhists want to be born in the Pure Land. And that is the place where all struggles experienced while alive are supposed to cease. When all struggles are brought to an end, what do we have? The Kingdom of Heaven on earth. When we have at long last this much-desired Land of Promise, what do we do then? We cannot just sit around enjoying eternal peace. So the Kingdom of Heaven is not such a desirable thing after all, and I am sure that when we are born there we will soon find ourselves looking for something more exciting. When there is nothing to do but enjoy happiness the Kingdom of Heaven is altogether too peaceful. Once attained happiness is no longer happiness. Happiness must be counterbalanced—it must stand in opposition to something which is not happiness. For some people, then, hell seems a much better place than heaven. There they can find the excitement, conflict, and struggle which is the very significance of life.

We try our best to shun misery and suffering, but somehow suffering is needed if life is to go on in this world. For instance, Americans talk so much about easy living, and like to have things go on in the easiest possible way. They like to avoid struggles or difficulties of any kind. Yet in the early days of America, they worked hard with the frontier spirit struggling against the wilderness. That spirit is what is needed. This is a question which social anthropologists should think more about. When life is taken too easily, man's spirit tends to deteriorate.

The conflict of major significance which gives rise to our religious consciousness is not to be avoided. The conflict must take place, but at the same time we have to be aware of its meaning. It must be an enlightened conflict, not a blind, ignorant one. Without knowing the significance of the conflict that is the cause of our suffering, the struggle is meaningless. When we know what these conflicts are all about, then we find that we can go on. But as long as we continue, unaware and blind, life is a most tragic thing. So the conflict and the causes of the conflict must be made clear and brought out to the foreground of consciousness. This is what is most important.

Some may think the struggle consists in sacrificing or crushing the ego. But crushing the ego is not the thing; the ego is there. Original Sin is there. When Original Sin is done away with, human beings cease to exist. So as long as man lives, Original Sin can never be effaced from this earth. In fact, because Original Sin exists, we are given to purifying ourselves, and to liberating ourselves from sin. Sin sticks tenaciously to us, and by

sticking to us, the way of purity, or the way of sinlessness is made possible. To attain a sinless life, sinfulness must be constantly hovering near. This is a contradiction, a paradox, but this paradox is what is needed to make life really worthwhile.

Now Christianity has a drastic way of putting an end to this struggle, exemplified by the crucifixion. Christ was crucified, according to Christian mythology. I call it “mythology”; it can’t be an historical fact. But this crucifixion was described in a most dramatic, violent, and I would say in a most concretely human way. “Corporeal” is another term I sometimes use to characterize the Christian way of interpreting life.

But fortunately, I say fortunately, Christ did not die. Crucifixion was followed by resurrection. But somehow between crucifixion and resurrection, according to the legend, three days passed. Whether this is historically true or not is another question. But why were the three days necessary? This is where Buddhism differs from Christianity. Buddhism would say crucifixion *means* resurrection; not crucifixion followed by resurrection. Crucifixion is itself resurrection.

In a way, God killed himself in order to save himself. And when God killed himself to save himself, he did not leave three days in between; there ought not to be any time interval. This would be the Buddhist criticism of the Christian idea of crucifixion.

Some Christians may object to this idea, but whenever I compare Buddhism with Christianity I always take this matter up. Whenever I travel in Catholic countries, I find the crucifixion scene so persistently and glaringly in evidence—even by the roadsides. There is something about the sight which I do not like to look at and which goes against my grain.

On the other hand, there is something in Christianity which I like very much, although Christians don’t seem to share my opinion. I am talking about the Maria myth, the Virgin cult. It is this Maria legend or myth which saves Christianity from being so completely austere. Christianity is really quite austere. It does not leave much room for forgiveness. Righteousness is a prominent feature of Christ, but Maria is so full of forgiveness. She is nothing but forgiveness.

Sometime ago I read a story which I liked very much indeed. I think Christianity needs such stories. Some Christians may even want to invent or create a religious system around this story. It goes something like this:

“The guardian of the Kingdom of Heaven is St. Peter. Christ came around to inspect Heaven. He asked St. Peter, ‘As I look around my king-

dom, I see there are some members not quite worthy of my dominion. How is it? You are here as the guardian; why do you allow such souls to pass through the gates?' Then St. Peter answered, 'I am sorry to find such people within this compound, but the fault is not really mine. For whenever such people beg to be permitted, I dutifully turn them away. The fault is with your mother who helps them in through the back window! And since she is your mother, how can I say anything!' "

What is lacking in Christianity, and also in the Jewish religion, is the trait of femininity. The male gender predominates, with God as Father and Christ as Son, and the male mind is inevitably fixed with a certain amount of rigidity; there is a sense of legality. This is contrary to the feminine way of conceiving life. Forgiveness, unconditional forgiveness, is needed. Fortunately, for some Christians this need is filled by Christ's mother. A few years ago, the Pope officially proclaimed the Maria myth as a dogma of the Church, and Maria's ascension became one of the principal dogmas for the Catholics. The Protestants protested against it, but it is quite natural that Maria should have ascended to heaven. I don't know exactly how the ascension took place, but that is not a crucial question. The main thing is her having ascended. Whether she went alive or dead does not matter, for she ought to be in Heaven. If Christ was resurrected, why not Maria? Even if she was not crucified, she has just as much right to be born in Heaven. The Christ myth and the Virgin Mary myth must go in parallel. Maria's right is just as absolute as Christ's. When the son performs all kinds of miracles, why not his mother?

In this way Buddhism takes the Maria legend kindly, and objects to Christianity's conditional acceptance of sinners. Buddhists accept sinners unconditionally. That is, if they have faith in the Buddha of Eternal Life and Light, sinners can enter Buddha's Pure Land with all their sins. Those sins are effaced without the need for the sinners to efface them. As soon as the sinner enters the Pure Land, whatever sin he has committed is effaced without any difficulty. This unconditional acceptance of sinners into the Pure Land is the Buddhist standpoint, whereas in Christianity you must be righteous, and one's sins must be washed in the blood of Christ. This is where Christian "corporeality" comes in; it would follow that the crucifixion should happen in Christ's corporeal existence.

At the same time, Christianity has a strong point, passion and activity, which Buddhists must somehow follow. Buddhism has that element, too, but it has not been brought out so prominently or conspicuously. Yester-

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day, I read a little poem to my class I found in *The New York Times* a few days ago. It is entitled “Buddha and St. Joan,” and the contrast presented is in many ways quite illuminating. The poem is about a room in which a statue of Gautama Buddha in a posture of meditation sits in one corner, and in the other an image of Joan of Arc.

With but a narrow space between,  
Gautama on the Chinese cabinet  
might look across at the mask of  
    the Maid on the wall opposite,  
but his eyes remain cast down.  
His flesh is golden and his garment  
    slate,  
his lotus pedestal a faded red.  
Joan’s hair lies low upon her brow  
    in a black braid;  
cheeks aglow with the vigor of  
    youth,  
she looks toward the Buddha, rosy mouth  
calling to rouse him from passivity.  
She battles Fate, and he accepts it.  
Western passion, Eastern calm,  
locked in the tension of a quiet room.<sup>1</sup>

The quiet room is full of tension—Eastern calm on one side, and Western passion and activity on the other. Although the poem says that the Buddha simply “accepts” fate, it is not exactly acceptance on the Buddha’s part, for he is transcending it—this is something which one should be conscious of between the lines. Joan of Arc “battles” fate. I don’t know if she did really battle fate, for hers is quite a unique historical phenomenon, full of mystery and wonder. Anyhow, now she looks toward Buddha, and tries to awaken him with her rosy mouth from the passivity of his meditation.

What I have left unfinished or unsaid in these first lectures I will try to bring out next time in a more visible way.

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<sup>1</sup> By Myla Jo Closser; March 6, 1957.