

Why a Buddhist Loves Jesus

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UUCV, December 26, 2010

Like so many others all over the world, this congregation has been enjoying the Christmas season. We decorated our house of worship, lit advent candles, had a children's Christmas pageant (which was about a children's Christmas pageant) and sung the good old songs, secular and sacred. We've even had a candlelight service and told the stories from Matthew and Luke. I love it as much as anyone, I think, especially the singing. In every way we've apparently been celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, God become flesh and blood in the form of a tiny Jewish peasant baby in Palestine, who thereby saved those who believe in him from sin and damnation.

Except...as we all know, most of us don't endorse that big idea. Indeed, except for the song lyrics we don't talk very much about Jesus, not even now, and sometimes not even at Easter, the other obvious time to do it. We use the Christian holidays to explore themes that don't depend on a myth that we can't believe, such as meditating during Advent on waiting, or about the incarnation of love, and so on. Many of us are here and not in another of the many churches of central Pennsylvania this morning because we drifted away from the stories we heard as children. The virgin mother, the star, the magicians, the empty tomb; and, of course, the threat—believe or be left out, or maybe worse—believe or be damned.

But I like Jesus—a lot—and I miss him. I think that he's perhaps the greatest religious genius in the history of the world and that his teaching and his life are still completely relevant even to a bunch of ill-defined spiritual seekers in Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania. I don't identify myself as a Christian, but rather as a Buddhist, and it occurred to me that maybe this would be the appropriate time and place to make this confession, hoping that it might help some of you to come to Jesus—or come back to Jesus—too.

For several decades now I have considered myself a Buddhist, but if you scratch me deep enough, you'll find a Norwegian Lutheran. A Lutheran Buddhist—a LuBu—or a BuLu. Thanks to Garrison Keillor, the ways of my people are probably known to you. I can attest that his stories are all true. I spent the Sunday mornings of my youth prowling the nooks and crannies of Olivet Lutheran Church on 10th Street in Fargo. I remember it as being a lot like this old church, probably built at about the same time. The walls and carpet were green and deeper green, the wood was dark, the stained glass windows and paintings depicted New Testament scenes. I sang "Jesus Loves Me" downstairs with the kids and "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" upstairs with the adults and collected change in a plastic bank shaped like a church. I went to summer bible school and came on Saturdays for Luther League. I was an acolyte, lighting the big candles

at the back of the altar with a special long brass candle lighter. I knew there were Catholics and Mormons and Jews, but they seemed to be few in number and to have strange customs that probably made them unattractive in the cool light of the New Frontier. I supposed that most people in the world were also Lutherans.

In other words, I didn't take it very seriously. And then came the confirmation classes, which in the Lutheran church is literally the moment of indoctrination. We were given Luther's *Small Catechism* and asked to memorize it. This *Catechism* was in question and answer form—the Ten Commandments, the apostle's creed, the Lord's Prayer, and so on. Each week we had classes in which Pastor Preus and Pastor Livdahl explained what it meant.

For the first time in my life, I really focused on exactly what they'd been saying from the pulpit Sunday after Sunday. Among other things, the Catechism explained that faith was the main thing. But then, confusingly, it stated that I couldn't have it under my own power, but only through the grace of the Holy Spirit. I wondered: doesn't that make me a sort of puppet? Pastor Preus didn't care for the question or for many of the others that followed. My confusion deepened; my skepticism grew; and although I stayed until the end and received my certificate and a bible (I've still got it, with all the pencil underlining) I was really already gone.

There is a lot more to my story, but I'll just summarize by saying that a few years later I decided to use what remained of my college education to question my atheism. I felt that I'd been superficial and in a hurry and I wanted to make sure I wasn't making a big mistake. So I took a bunch of courses in Christian theology and ethics. I graduated and in a couple more years I found myself in Charlottesville, Virginia, beginning to work on a Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies. But I took several graduate courses in Christian theology and ethics, making it my secondary concentration. By the end, I felt that I had really fairly considered Christianity. And although sometimes I would describe myself as a sort of Christian, the "sort of" part meant that I had to do some fancy intellectual dancing to make it work in my head; and although it appealed to my heart (that's really what I'm trying to say today) I was further away from mainstream Christianity than I was at the age of fifteen.

I just could not believe in the pregnant virgin, the voice in the sky, the empty tomb. I saw that Christianity was largely the construction of Paul, who had his own particular take on what Jesus meant that I thought distorted Jesus, making him into a god and emphasizing faith in him rather than what he taught.

But—and here's the reason for today's sermon—at the same time I had thought, really thought, about who Jesus was and what he taught. I saw that he was an amazing man with great courage and love and that he modeled a way of life that was authentic and true. I also think that he must have had an enlightenment experience sometime in his twenties, one not very different

from the enlightenment experience of Siddhartha who became the Buddha or the enlightenment experiences of countless men and women whose names are not renowned. He seems to have had a deep intuition about himself, and by extension, all people everywhere. Basically, he realized that his self-cherishing had no basis—that he was not the center of the world—and that consequently he was deeply connected to everyone else regardless of their background.

The terms in which he expressed this intuition fit his age—God the Father, the Kingdom of Love, fulfilling the law—but he subverted their received meaning to open up a new way of looking at life. This is a subject for multiple 15 minute sermons, so today to make my point I just want to talk about two linked ideas in the teaching of Jesus, the presence of the Kingdom of God and the power of forgiveness.

Jesus often speaks about the Kingdom of God, but the New Testament contains conflicting accounts. Usually we find him referring to it as something to come in the future, which reflects the background of Jewish hopes that God would deliver them from oppression and the expectation of those authors that Jesus was going to come back within their lifetimes to establish a new society on earth. It is reasonable, of course, and modern to think of Jesus as a product of his culture. But there are other passages that reveal a new way of understanding the Kingdom. I share the view of Thomas Jefferson and Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau and Leo Tolstoy and Elaine Pagels and many others that in Jesus we have a religious prodigy who transcends his cultural conditioning and understands the Kingdom in a very different way. So, I think those passages should be disregarded. Instead, we should focus on passages in which he indicates that it is already here and that it is found not in some other place and time but in our own hearts. Jefferson said that the process of culling the authentic sayings from the others is not really so difficult; as he wrote on several occasions, it is like picking diamonds out of a dunghill.

And, as we now know, the New Testament is not the only possible source for the authentic teachings of Jesus, since the discovery only about sixty years ago of a big jar buried in the dirt under a cliff near a small town in northern Egypt. The jar contained thirteen collections of books. Some of them are at least as old as the letters of Paul and older than any of the Christian gospels. In other words, they are Christian texts older than the New Testament.

They belonged to people who have been called “Gnostics” because of their shared theme that spiritual practice is a path of learning that leads to enlightenment or gnosis—the word from which our modern word, “knowledge” is derived. These Christians looked to Jesus as one in whom the divine could be seen, a teacher who both through his words and his life exemplified godliness. To use the Sanskrit terms, they saw him as a Buddha—an awakened one—and a guru—one through whom the light of truth shines and who can bring others to the same state

of enlightenment. If a monk from India had traveled through Palestine and Egypt at that time and talked to them, he might have thought it remarkable that the Dharma of Buddhism had been discovered in such a far off place and might want to know more about the teachings of the Jewish Buddha, Jesus.

To me, the importance of the teachings in the jar is that they seem to indicate just which of the several versions of Jesus in the official texts—the bible—is the right one. It is a Jesus who reminds me of the other great spiritual teachers I've encountered, especially the Buddha.

One of the oldest of the many books in the Egyptian jar was the Gospel of Thomas, perhaps the oldest text about Jesus of Nazareth. In it, Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is not in the sky or the seas, but everywhere, including within each of us. This is what he says:

If those who lead you say to you, "look, the Kingdom is in the sky," then the birds of the sky will get there first. If they say, "It is in the sea," then the fish will get there first. Rather, the Kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you.

Everywhere! In the garbage and the nuclear waste and the hunger of children and brutality everything else. And it is in us, somehow. How can we know that? By looking within. He goes on to say:

When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the children of the living father.

By *knowing ourselves*, we find the kingdom of God. We realize that we are the sons and daughters of God? Does he really mean this? That we, too, not just him, are holy? If there is any doubt, it is removed by the ending of the gospel, when he addresses himself to his disciple Thomas. He says:

Whosoever drinks from my mouth will become as I am; and I will become that person; and the mysteries will be revealed to him.

In another text from the same discovery, the Book of Thomas the Contender, he says:

While you accompany me, although you do not yet understand it, you have already come to know, and you will be called "the one who knows himself." For whoever has not known himself knows nothing, but he who has known himself has already understood the depth of all things.

Now, these passages are not entirely contrary to the New Testament. Luke does record him saying that the Kingdom is found within us, and Mark records him saying that it is approached

through being like a child and found through understanding. But those are far outnumbered by the other kind and have been explained away by centuries of church teaching.

In any case, the Kingdom of God, Jesus says, is more precious than anything else. He once describes it as a pearl so magnificent that it is worth everything else we might have. Yet it is freely available everywhere, for everyone, for its essence is self-understanding.

As a Buddhist, I resonate with this. The kingdom of God is a state of peace and love for which all of us deeply yearn. It is not in some far off place and time, but here, now, if we are open to seeing it. To be open we have to understand ourselves.

In Buddhism, the Kingdom of God is called the Buddha-nature and the self-understanding that reveals it is called the path to enlightenment. The Buddha-nature is the natural purity and openness of the mind—the quality of knowing and illumination that is fundamental for all of us. It isn't something that only Buddhists have, or that Buddhas have and the rest of us don't. It is a reality always present, if obscured by our concepts and feelings—our lifetime of commercials and popular culture and our worries and hopes.

Since Buddhism means “awakenism” all of its practices one way or another are directed at helping us to experience our Buddha-nature. Some are very direct, such as Zen or the Tibetan method called the Great Perfection, where our attention is trained on the pure luminosity of the mind between thoughts. We might experience a profound stillness that is utterly awake, and rising out of us, see clearly how we are continually constructing the world.

Other means are more indirect but work better than the direct methods, such as those that train us to become aware of the sources of our conceptions and feelings.

But all can be described the way Jesus describes the Kingdom of God: as an indwelling reality of self-knowing that brings peace and allows us to love others. For the experience of Buddha-nature reveals a self that is far different than the self that ordinarily motivates us. We can't help but discover how we are not really ourselves at all, but are entirely made of what is not ourselves—that we are deeply interconnected with our environment, with innumerable other creatures, that even our thoughts are not our own but arise interdependently.

Like countless others, and I'm sure many of you, I have glimpsed the kingdom of God in this way on occasion, and so I believe in it. It is mysterious, but not inaccessible. We lived in it often as children, although we didn't know that we did. We then faced the world without our concepts and without self-consciousness, and we experienced its pure existence. It can be difficult to recapture that mood of openness and unmediated wonder, but it can be done. Jesus said that one must approach the Kingdom as a child would. I don't think that he meant that we should

act childishly, but rather that we allow ourselves to experience our world in a way different from the way that as adults we have been conditioned to see it.

This does not require adding anything or developing anything, but rather an emptying out. The Buddhist term for emptiness is śūnyatā. It refers to the fact that the world, including ourselves, does not have the nature of independence and individuality that it appears to have.

Understanding the emptiness of the world also empties us of the errors of perception and conception that we have built up in a lifetime of experience. The process of emptying out just reveals more clearly the Buddha nature—the clarity and luminosity of basic wakefulness.

Christianity too has a term for emptiness, one that I know David Glasgow likes—I know it from Facebook, of course—and which is the theme of his song “Even the Trees,” which the choir will shortly sing. It is kenosis. It usually refers to Paul’s idea that the divine Christ emptied himself of divinity in order to become fully human, filling himself again with divinity upon his apotheosis. Or on a personal level, it can mean the emptying out of the human will so that it can be replaced by God’s will.

Jesus, I think, did experience kenosis. He emptied out. But not of his divinity; he emptied out his self-concept. There is another Paul, a 20th century German Protestant theologian who finished his life teaching in America, who helped me understand this. Paul Tillich showed me a way to think about God and Christ that almost was workable for me. For Tillich, god could not be ultimate without being beyond the limits of personhood; god could not be A being, even if the Supreme Being. God must mean Being Itself or the Ground of Being—existence itself. This way of talking about God becomes the key to a whole systematic theology that translates all the troublesome concepts of Christianity into something quite remarkable, but I just want to focus on what he says about Jesus. Jesus is the Christ, he says, because he is “transparent to the Ground of Being”—because he becomes a clear lens through which it is possible to see what ties us to everyone and everything. The teaching of Jesus is to drop the superficial differences that separate us from others and ourselves—prejudices of caste and clan and tribe and religion, of occupation and age—to focus on what grounds us all. When we open ourselves to others without expectation, we find them in the Ground of Being, in pure existence itself, which is why it is possible to say that God is Love and that from Love all springs.

We find this idea of clarity, of openness, of emptiness in that most remarkable Sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. For me, it is for Jesus what the *Dharmacakra Pravartana Sutra*, the first teaching of the Four Noble Truths, was for Buddha: the signature moment.

What did Jesus say in the Sermon on the Mount? So much. But a few highlights:

- What matters is your intention, not mere action. Hatred itself is violence.

- Don't judge, but understand.
- Return hatred toward you with love. Double what is asked of you. Most astonishingly: love your enemies.

Love your enemies! It still takes my breath away. Not “don't hate your enemies”; not “tolerate your enemies”; no, love them. It is part of a theme with Jesus that resonates with me as a Buddhist, and that is forgiveness. By this Jesus means not God's forgiveness of us, but rather our forgiveness of ourselves and our forgiveness of each other.

This, too, is about a higher level of understanding. I personally don't have enemies—I don't think. But there are people who I dislike, sometimes intensely. One of my tendencies is to demonize those who I see as leading us down a path to ruin. Mitch McConnell and John Boehner are despicable people not because they disagree with the President; they are despicable because they have the same high quality information he has about climate change and health care and other life and death issues, but for nothing other than their political careers they choose to lie and obstruct. Just the sound of McConnell's voice or the sight of Boehner's perpetually tanned skin begins to make my blood rise.

But Jesus said that we are all the same, and he broke bread with people whom others loathed. Felons, crack addicts, welfare mothers; Jihadists, global warming deniers, Wall Street financiers, Ahmedinijad, ethnic cleansers, corrupt African dictators, and yes, Republican leaders.

How do we forgive our enemies? Well, first we must forgive ourselves, which we can do through understanding ourselves. When we have come to peace with ourselves, it is a little easier to start on the job of understanding others. We have un-demonize them, seeing them for what they really are, lost souls who have been warped by the same forces of delusion, greed, and ill-will that have affected us; there, but for our good fortune, would we have gone as well.

The Buddha taught a progressive method for loving one's enemies. In the “Love Sutra” he advises us to imagine our loved ones and wish them happiness and freedom from suffering. Then, holding that feeling, we turn to strangers, and finally to enemies, giving them the same wishes.

There is much more to say, but at another time. I'd like to conclude by returning to something I first spoke about here ten years ago.

Directly after proclaiming the Sermon on the Mount to a huge crowd, members of Jesus' family came to seize him. They said—and this is in the bible, I'm not making it up—“He is out of his mind.” And what did Jesus do in response? He pointed to the crowd around him and called them his family.

In one of my first stints as a Worship Associate a decade ago I collaborated with Judy on the Christmas service. I had the idea that we could talk about Jesus as an adopted child—I was then a father twice over by adoption, and I was thinking about Joseph's adoption of Jesus, who the story tells us is not the biological son of his father. It was an interesting way to approach the story and it led me into a lot of reflection on what a family really is.

The way it ended is relevant to what we have been talking about today. Jesus dropped the narrow view of family and treated everyone he met as family. He was able to do this because he had been emptied of the idea of exclusive love in which his culture believed. His profound ability to connect with others is demonstrated in his many healings. As we know, and can now actually prove, the key to a healing is the spirit of the healer and the one who needs healing.

I think that Jesus had an impeccable spirit that shines through the all the things that people have written and said about him. May we receive that light.