

WEEK 4

Greed, Non-Attachment and Compassion



Christians in Conversation with Buddhists about the reduction of suffering

Introduction

The theme for this week is non-attachment as part of the Christian journey, with particular reference to a section of the Sermon on the Mount that stresses the dangers of greed and love of money (Mammon). This will be examined in conversation with Christians, particularly the writer of the session hereafter referred to in the first person, who have been influenced by Buddhism.

Reflection

Matthew 6: 19-33

'For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (v.21)

'[I]f your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness' (v. 22)

'You cannot serve God and wealth' (v. 24)

These sayings from our passage hit hard. There are no 'ifs' or 'buts'. Jesus does not say – 'If you seek to gain wealth in order to share your wealth with others, that's okay' or 'If you love your possessions but also try to serve God, that's okay'. Rather Jesus points to a rather blunt either/or. You can choose earth or you can choose heaven, darkness or light, wealth or God. In effect, he invites his listeners to

choose between two ways of being in the world. The first is driven by wealth, possessions and worry. The second is centred on putting the Kingdom of God first and freedom from worry. And these two ways are illustrated through the 'heart' and the 'eye' – our emotive centre (the heart) and our intention or volition (the eye).

The message is counter-cultural. Our society presents the amassing of wealth as an insurance against worry about how we will house, clothe and feed ourselves in old age. In contrast, we know that there are single parents who worry with good reason about how they will feed their children, because some of their benefits have been removed. Try telling them not to worry when their only option is the food bank– or farmers in India or Africa who have watched their crops die through drought. To be told not to be concerned about our future material security because the lilies are 'clothed' by God seems to fly in the face of the empirical fact that God doesn't protect all plants and animals from the ravages of drought, fire and flood. We can marvel at well-watered roses in our summer gardens but could not do so if rains had failed and the trees around us were dried and stunted by lack of water. How, then, are we supposed to read Jesus's words in this part of the Sermon on the Mount?

I have read passages such as this in conversation with Buddhism, which I have studied and drawn into my life

for thirty years, and realise through this conversation that Jesus is not talking about economic realities but about how our senses and our minds work.

The central question in Buddhism is, 'Why do we suffer?' Why is life unsatisfactory and filled with anguish? Why do our hopes rarely come to fruition? The historical Buddha, Gautama, is believed to have left a life of privileged luxury in order to find the answer, becoming a homeless mendicant. The answer he found, which made him a Buddha, is encapsulated in the Four Noble Truths or, as some scholars prefer, Truths for the Noble Ones. The first truth affirms that there is indeed something out of joint and skewed at the heart of existence, which causes us suffering, worry and anguish. The Pali term for this is *dukkha*. The second truth concerns the cause of *dukkha*, which the Buddha identified as egotistical craving or selfishness, *tanhā* in Pali. We suffer because our minds, hearts and actions are riddled with selfish craving, expressed through the three poisons of greed, hatred and delusion. The third truth affirms that if *tanha* is eradicated, *dukkha* must end; it simply has no fuel. The Fourth Truth gives a path for the eradication of *dukkha* – the Eightfold Path consisting of Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

Buddhists see humans as imprisoned by the poisons of greed, hatred and delusion. We are attracted towards all that is pleasant; we avert our eyes from the unpleasant. We believe that our wealth, health, possessions, physical strength and relationships will last forever. When they do not, when illness strikes, when someone precious to us dies or we are brought face to face with suffering, we are thrown into anguish.

The Simile of the Saw

'Bhikkhus [Monks], even if bandits were to sever you savagely limb by limb with a two-handed saw, he who gave rise to a mind of hatred towards them would not be carrying out my teaching. Herein, bhikkhus, you should train thus: 'Our mind will remain unaffected, and we shall utter no evil words; we shall abide compassionate for their welfare, with a mind of loving-kindness, without inner hate. We shall abide pervading them with a mind imbued with loving-kindness; and starting with them, we shall abide pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill-will.' (The Simile of the Saw, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, Bhikkhu Ñanamoli & Bhikku Bodhi (trans.). Boston: Wisdom, 1995: p. 223)

Our text from Matthew moves within similar territory. 'Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' is saying, if given a Buddhist slant, 'The things you are greedy for, the things you wish to possess, will take over you mind and heart and imprison you'. As for the enigmatic verses about the eye (v. 22-23), Buddhism has much to say about what happens when the senses interact with external stimuli. At the point of interaction, feeling arises first of all, usually in the form of attraction or aversion. Feeling then produces craving, craving produces grasping and both then lead to suffering. Important to all this is the 'I' - placing the self and its wishes at the centre of the universe.

In the Bible passage, the eye seems to represent all the senses and also the will. If the way we relate to the sensory impressions around us is healthy then our will, our volition, will be healthy, our intentions and actions will be healthy. We will not be attracted to treasures of this world. We will be more likely to 'see' that only what is linked with heaven is worth yearning for.

'But doesn't Buddhism encourage detachment from everything?' you might ask, adding, 'And do Christians really want to learn from that?' That Buddhism encourages detachment from everything is a false stereotype. One of the Pali words that is translated 'detachment' is *virāga*, which literally means 'without lust or craving'. What Buddhism promotes, I have come to see, is non-attachment or non-clinging to the usual objects of our selfish craving – possessions, wealth, sensual pleasures and our own egos or selves. And, when this letting go is achieved, what arises is not indifference but compassion – the ability to empathise with the suffering of all and to seek to eradicate this suffering. And non-attachment to 'self' goes to the extent of being able to offer one's life for the good of others or to be able to bless another even if that person is cutting off your limbs with a saw. One who is able to do this would be judged a 'Buddha-to-be'.

Jesus is encouraging a frame of mind similar to this when he teaches that we should not worry about what will happen to the 'self'. It is a liberation from placing the 'self' at the centre that Jesus is talking about. My study of Buddhism has shown me just how radical this is. For it is only when concern for 'self' is transcended that we can really work for 'the kingdom of God and his righteousness', which involves the wellbeing of all, not only the self.

There are of course differences between Buddhism and Christianity. Buddhist texts link the arising of craving

through sensory contact with continued rebirth. Only the person who has eradicated craving will not be reborn. And Buddhists do not place a Creator God at the centre of their practice and belief. Religions touch and diverge, and are not the same. That does not mean, however, that they cannot give insight to each other.

An illustration of another Christian encounter with Buddhism

Thomas Merton (1915–68) converted to Roman Catholicism as a young man and became a Trappist (or Cistercian) monk at Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky. He became increasingly interested in the spirituality of Buddhism and Hinduism, and called for inter-monastic dialogue. He was killed by accidental electrocution in Bangkok at one such dialogue meeting.

His visit to Bangkok was part of a larger Asian journey. Between November 29th and December 6th 1968, just days before his death, he was in Sri Lanka. One of the places he visited was the Gal Vihāra (Stone Monastery) at Polonnaruwa (one of the ancient Buddhist capitals of the island), where three magisterial images are carved into stone, two of the Buddha and one, most probably, of the Buddha's closest companion, Ānanda. Here, Merton, after a long period of reading about Buddhism and meeting some of its representatives, had what can only be called an epiphany in front of these images, a seeing into truth. He wrote this in his Journal:

Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. The queer evidence of the reclining figure, the smile, the sad smile of Ananda standing with arms folded (much more 'imperative' than Da Vinci's Mona Lisa because completely simple and straightforward). The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no 'mystery'. All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya (cosmic wisdom and compassion)... everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination (Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart & James Laughlin eds., 1973 2nd Printing. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*. New York: New Directions: 233–235).

'Emptiness' in Buddhism is linked to the insight that nothing exists on its own. Everything is connected. Reality is non-dual. There need be no distinction between 'me' and 'you', my concerns and your concerns.

Questions for discussion

1. What experiences of Buddhism, if any, have you had? Share them with the group.
2. How do you react to the extract from 'The Simile of the Saw'?
3. How would you respond to a Buddhist who shares with you that he sees Jesus as a Buddha-to-be (a bodhisattva) because he was willing to offer his body for the good of others, letting go of concern for self?
4. Is non-attachment to wealth and the self the gateway to seeing what the Kingdom of God requires of us?
5. Buddhism emphasises compassion as a quality needed to create a better world. Do you agree?
6. How far can Buddhist insights into the cause of suffering help an understanding of what Jesus is saying in the Bible reading?

Further Resources

- Elizabeth J. Harris & Ramona Kauth (eds.). *Meeting Buddhists*. Leicester: Christians Aware.
- Elizabeth J Harris, 2012. *Buddhism for a Violent World: A Christian Reflection*. London: SCM.

Prayer

Lord of compassion and justice, help us to see how our greeds and hatreds are imprisoning us. Meet us in our journey towards greater freedom. Free us from the fears and worries that prevent us from seeing the world as you would have us see it. And touch us with passion for your Kingdom and your righteousness. In the name of Jesus Amen.