

Ecumenical



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BUDDHISM: RELIGION OF INNER PEACE

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We have looked at three of the four major non-Christian religious traditions: Judaism, Islam and Hinduism. The first two are, with Christianity, Abrahamic Traditions, rooted in the stories of Abraham, our father in faith. Hinduism comes from a culture that is literally half a world away, but, as we saw, had points of similarity with Christianity, particularly in its Franciscan expression, especially finding God in all things. The final major tradition we will look at is Buddhism. Buddhism can, on the surface, seem like it has little in common with Christianity: Buddhists do not accept the idea of God, seem to focus on self-effort, and rarely speak of love. However, when we dig beneath the surface, several interesting items parallels come forward.

Both Buddhism and Franciscanism were founded by charismatic leaders, who were raised with privilege and possessions, both of whom became renunciants. Both the Buddha and Francis were raised with the conventional religiosity of their day, and both offered a new vision. Both the Buddha and Francis attracted followers by their sincerity and dedication. Both founded mendicant communities, forbidding their monks or friars from even touching money. Both distrusted philosophical or theological discourse for its own sake, but both inspired great thinkers who fleshed out the implications of their teachings. And both, at the end of their lives, said something along the line of "I have done my part; now you do yours."

The Buddha was born a prince in the 6th century BC, and raised in luxury. At his birth, an old sage predicted that if he ever discovered the transient and unsatisfying nature of the world, he would renounce his position and become an enlightened being. Fearing this possibility,

the king made sure that young Prince Siddhartha never wanted for anything, never knew old age, sickness or death: only young, healthy, happy people were allowed around him. There is a story that when he was a child, he was left unattended at a festival. When they found him, he was seated under a tree, meditating. The shadow of the tree, it is said, did not move with the sun, protecting the young prince all day long. (Sound familiar?)

However, when he was 29, he encountered old age, sickness and death, and realized that life was finite and permeated with suffering. In response, he gave up his position in life, donned the robes of a begging monk, and began a six-year search. He studied philosophy at first, but found that he was still left with a feeling of uneasiness. He then tried extreme asceticism, believing that if he tamed the body and its passions, his mind would be free. This almost killed him. Finally, he sat under a tree and vowed not to move until enlightened. The story says that with enlightenment ("Buddha" means the Enlightened One), he recognized that the human condition was one of dissatisfaction, and that the cause was our seemingly endless desire, our yearning. He taught that if one eliminated coveting and attachment, one would eliminate the feeling of dissatisfaction. Truth, he said, was found in the Middle Path, between two extremes (an insight also taught by Medieval Christian theologians, following Aristotle).

The Buddha taught that all things are impermanent, and therefore unable to satisfy us: possessions, power, prestige. Even our very self, he taught, was impermanent (everything I can put my finger on as "me," in other words, is not really me: body, thoughts, feelings, even the mind itself). He taught the Eightfold Path, a way to eliminate our constant yearning: right viewpoint, right action, right occupation of one's time, and so forth. These culminated with right meditation, the inner practice of letting go. When we learn to let go of our inner attachments, we can begin, also, to let go of our outer attachments, and conversely.

Eventually, Buddhist thinkers described the emptiness of all things in terms of their impermanence and the fact that everything is also interconnected. Therefore, you can't grasp a hold of anything in and of itself: everything is what it is in relation to everything else. Because of this, we should take a stance of non-harming and non-possessing. The first two precepts that one takes upon becoming a Buddhist are non-harming and non-stealing.

The parallels with the lives of Jesus and Francis should be clear. It is also interesting that Buddhist teaching bears so many similarities to the Franciscan interpretation of Christianity: Francis forbade his

followers, religious and lay, to bear arms. Friars were not to touch money. Every creature was to be honored as brother or sister. St. Bonaventure, often called the second founder of the Order, taught that even God is dynamic and interrelated (this was the way Bonaventure understood the Trinity). The dynamic interconnection that is God is reflected in the dynamic interrelationships among creatures and between God and Creation. This is a universal application of what St. Paul had already said of the Church: when one member suffers or is exalted, the entire Body suffers or is exalted. This is the very basis of St. Francis' realization that every creature is brother and sister.

I would like to end with two stories of Franciscan encounters with Buddhists. My fraternity hosted a dinner for some Tibetan monks visiting Austin. During our conversation (one of the monks acted as a translator), I told the monk the story of St. Francis. He had never heard the story before, and was quite impressed with the points of similarity to the Buddhist story. In the end, I gave him my San Damiano cross, for which he expressed much gratitude. Since we did not actually speak the same language, I felt that this might have been one way of "preaching the Gospel," while only being able to use a few words.

I am a member of the Society for Buddhist Christian Studies. One year, at our annual meeting, part of the discussion centered around whether plants had consciousness or not. The Buddhist tradition tends to say no, only animal life has consciousness. The Christian tradition is largely silent on this. I said, "I am a Franciscan, and Francis taught that every creature, animal or plant, organic or inanimate, is brother and sister. We've been waiting for 800 years for the rest of you to catch up, and frankly, we're getting tired of waiting."

I got an ovation from both Buddhists and Christians. I suspect that as never before in history, this may be the Franciscan moment.